



The Neighbor's Cat by na-nilla-wafers

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Summary: Randy Peters and Billy Hargrove, neighbors and silent enemies, are forced to work together to hunt down a mysterious creature after it begins to terrorize the sleepy town of Hawkins, Indiana. But their hunt grows complicated as they begin to learn that this isn't the first time its struck - and it won't be the last. Follows season 2. Billy x OC

1. The Cat

Randy stared down at the cat brushing up against her leg. She sighed.

"Not *again*."

She bent down and scooped up the tabby, which, as usual, melted in her arms and released a torrent of almighty purrs.

Twisting the knob with her elbow and then hip-checking the door open, she trumped out into the crisp, morning air in nothing but her sweatshirt, pajama pants, slippers, and the neighbor's cat, and made her way to the side of the house. She ignored the frost on the grass and the steady dampening of her slippers, muttering in annoyance as she followed course towards her neighbor's house.

She stopped in front of the same bedroom window she always stopped in front of every week, raised a fist, and wrapped loudly on the glass.

"Hargrove!" she yelled. Silence. "Hey, Hargrove!"

The curtain jerked back and Billy's sleep-hazed and scruffy face peered at her through the window. He swore.

She heard him unlatch the fastenings on the pane, then the window flew open.

"Hell d'ya want, dipshit?" he snapped, voice gravely with sleep. "It's six in the freaking morning."

Randy held up the cat.

"I think you lost something," she said.

Billy pressed his face into the pane and closed his eyes.

"How many times do I have to tell you that *that's not my cat*?"

"Until I believe you," Randy replied casually.

"I don't own a cat!"

"Ah, come on, Hargrove," she said, squishing the cat's face and dropping her voice into a simpering tone, "I shee dis widdle guy hanging outside your house *all* da time."

"Don't do that."

"Besides, you have a bowl of cat food by your front door." She gestured to the half-empty bowl, visible from Billy's window.

"That's probably just Max trying to feed it. It's a stray. Put it down before you get fleas or something."

"You do realize that it's not going to ruin your 'badass' reputation if you have a cat, right?"

"You seriously think that's what this is about, dipshit?"

"Oh, I *know* that's what this is about."

Billy squeezed his eye shut. His jaw clenched.

"We do this every week, Peters," he said, voice a force of calm. "And every week I tell you the *same damn thing*."

"And yet every week I keep having to return your lost pet," she replied with a dramatic sigh. "Life is tough, isn't it?"

"*I don't own a cat!*" Billy burst angrily.

But as if to prove Randy's point, the tabby leapt from her arms and onto Billy's window sill, narrowly missing his head.

Randy shrugged. "I don't know, Hargrove. Seems like the cat thinks otherwise."

"Oh, you gotta be shit—"

She raised a hand and walked off, leaving Billy to scowl and cuss behind the cat's fuzzy hindquarters.

"You've gotta be shitting me," Billy growled, waving the cat out of his face so that it plopped into the frosty grass outside. He slammed the window shut. "Every damn week. How the hell did I get stuck with such a screwed up neighbor?"

Billy was usually pretty great about keeping his composure, but Randy Peters always tested his ability to control himself. He wasn't sure what it was about her that made her such a nuisance, but he was ready to explode. He swore the next time she carried that stupid cat to his window, he was going to throw it back into her face.

It wasn't like he was trying to keep up *too* false of pretenses with her — they went to school together, she knew exactly what he was like, all hotheaded and hotblooded. He just didn't want to blow off *too* much steam in front of her, make a huge scene that might cause some talk at school. That could land his ass in some even more backwater shit-hole town, and that was the last thing he needed. He was nearly eighteen - one more year and he was a free man. And then it would be sayonara to Hawkins, Indiana and hello to sunny California.

Snagging a cigarette and flicking his lighter to life, Billy made his way to the bathroom. Thanks to the loser that was Peters, he was now too awake and too annoyed to crash for his usual last thirty minutes of sleep. And to make matters worse, it was just about the time that Max was up and getting around, which meant the bathroom door was shut and he got to wait another ten minutes before he could do his business. He could hear the shower running on the other side and his jaw twitched annoyedly.

He banged on the door.

"Max, hurry up!"

Silence.

Bang, bang, bang.

"I need to get in there, shithead!"

"Why aren't you asleep?" she yelled back.

"Does it matter?" he snapped. "Just hurry up!"

As was usual, their morning was spent in silence other than their short exchange of vehement insults. Max made sure to avoid him, which made getting into the bathroom a lot easier since she would squeeze past him just as soon as he arrived. Not that the lack of interaction hurt him, anyway. If he had a choice, he would make sure they had none at all. She could walk to school for all he cared. Unfortunately, under their present circumstances, that wasn't going to happen. His dad made sure of it.

Max was always ready first, Billy second. She didn't care much for her appearance, all scruffy, red hair, sweatshirts, and tennis shoes. Billy, on the other hand, was very meticulous with his. From his hair down to his way-too-much cologne and perfectly dragged on cigarette that drove the high school girls crazy, he took his time in preening every inch of himself, making sure he was a god of perfection when he stepped through those horrid, double doors of Hawkins High School. The girls might be cows and the guys hicks, but he had a rep to keep.

As he was putting the finishing touches on his slightly too-open shirt, he caught Max sneaking around the kitchen, her skateboard under one arm and a small plastic bowl in the other.

He didn't bother to hide himself. He didn't need too, really. The observant one was too engrossed in her shuffling around in the cabinet under the sink to notice Billy leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

He wasn't surprised when she dragged a bag of cat food out from the way back, but he didn't bother to hide his annoyance, either.

"So you're the one feeding the cat," he drawled.

Max jumped and dropped the bag of cat food, spilling tiny, brown pellets all over the floor.

"N-no," she lied.

Billy rolled his eyes and turned around, Camero keys jingling.

"Listen, I don't give a shit what you do, but if you're going to keep

that mangy animal around, make sure you tell our idiot neighbor that it's *your* cat, not mine."

"Why would I do that?"

Billy stopped, temper flaring.

"I understand you're deaf *and* stupid, so let me rephrase that for you. *Do it or you're dead.*" He looked at her over his shoulder. "Kapeesh?"

2. Harrington's is Better

Cats hated Randy.

She didn't know why. She was pretty sure that cats didn't know why, either. It was like some curse she had been destined with, some sad, mutual-disdain-for-each-other kind of curse, her and cats. Like some higher power thought it would be hysterical if the popular household creature tried to scratch out her eyes every time it saw her, or hissed at her if she tried to approach it. So the fact that Hargrove's cat actually *liked* her was pretty terrifying.

Forget the fact that it was an unusually fat tabby that was declawed and couldn't kill her even if it wanted to – the thing actually *liked* her. It snuck into her house whenever it had the chance, would follow her around, all purrs and fluff and chub, and would snuggle into her when she picked it up to carry it back to Hargrove's. And despite her allergies, she couldn't fight the sensation that she was actually liking the thing back.

How Hargrove could hate it and deny ownership was beyond her. Maybe it was just a strong reflection of his character, which was already poor from his reputation for sleeping around, bullying, and mouthing off to just about every authoritative figure in the book. It was simply made poorer because of his hatred of a perfectly reasonable feline that even *she* enjoyed.

Maybe it's because it really isn't his cat?

She pondered this for a moment. She shook her head.

Nah, she thought, grabbing her backpack and housekeys. He was just embarrassed.

The front door closed with a click behind her, and she stuffed the keys into her pocket as she made her way down the walkway.

Her departure was just in time to witness Hargrove's, who was making his way to his Camaro with his typical "hotter than thou" expression.

"Hey, dipshit," he called in greeting.

"Hey Hargrove," she called back. "How's the cat?"

He stopped walking and clenched his jaw.

"Are you always this obnoxious? Or is it simply around me?"

Randy pretended to ponder this.

"Mmmm," she hummed, "I think I'm this way with just about everyone."

"Oh, good," he said with false relief. "Now I don't feel special. I thought this might be your crude way of hitting on me or something."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but you're not really my type." She pulled an apologetic smile. "Maybe if you had a nicer butt?"

"Baby, you can't get any nicer than this."

To emphasize his point, he gave his hips a little kick. Randy grimaced.

"I don't know... Harrington's is *pretty* hard to beat."

Billy's smirk fell, and he turned to head to his car.

"Whatever, nerd. Have a nice walk."

"I will, thank you!" she replied with glorious exaltation, as if it was the nicest thing he'd ever said. Which, despite his sarcasm, probably was.

"You're such a dipshit," he muttered.

"You know, you call me that quite often, so I'm just gonna take it as a compliment."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"Sometimes you can be such a nice guy, Hargrove."

Billy flipped her the bird, and she grinned as she lifted a hand in goodbye, knowing he was thoroughly annoyed and she had done her job well.

3. A Backwater Town

Nancy shook her head as Hargrove's small cult following chanted in unison.

He held up the Coke can for everyone to see, earning jibes and cheers, then shot the contents down his throat in one go. He tossed the empty can aside, then belched loud enough for Nancy, Randy, and Ally to hear on the other side of the cafeteria. Nearly the whole school broke out with raucous howling, as if he had just downed a thing of alcohol instead of pop.

"Disgusting," she muttered, stabbing her fork through a piece of salad. "I don't get what's so appealing about him."

"He is pretty awful," Randy agreed, taking a bite of her sandwich as she watched the restless charade across the cafeteria.

"Yeah, but don't you have to, like, deal with him every day?" Ally asked.

"Oh gosh, you live next to him!" Nancy blurted, lowering her fork. "I totally forgot, you poor thing."

Randy shrugged. "I don't know, I guess I don't think about it too much."

"But you see him *all the time*," Ally said, leaning down as if she were about to say something juicy. "How can you not think about him when you have to deal with him every day?"

Randy rose a brow as she looked at her friend. "Do *you* talk to your neighbors every day?"

Ally opened her mouth. She shut it.

"Okay, but seriously," Nancy interjected. "How awful is it living next to the most popular douchebag in school?"

Randy settled back into her seat and lifted a shoulder.

"Nothing special, I guess," she said, waving her sandwich around as she thought. "I mean, I never really thought about it."

It was true. The Hargrove at school was a little different from the Hargrove that was her neighbor. Sure, they both were hotheads that couldn't drive and cussed like drunken sailors, but it was hard to see Hargrove her neighbor with his bedhead and scruff as the same Hargrove constantly disrupting the school day with his obnoxious antics.

"Did you guys know that he has a cat?" she asked suddenly.

"What I don't get," Nancy continued, spearing a cucumber and stuffing it into her mouth, "is why everyone loves him so much. I mean, the guy's a total asshole."

"Yeah, but he's a *hot* asshole," Ally pointed out.

"Um, no. He's not," Nancy argued.

"Okay, we all know you're dating the second hottest guy in school, Nance, but that doesn't mean you aren't allowed to admit that Billy is hot."

"Actually, it does. And he's not hot. I mean, who even wears earrings?"

"*Hot* guys."

Nancy groaned. "He's not!"

"Lies. Andy, isn't Billy super hot?"

Randy rubbed her arm as she slid her empty food tray away. Once again, Billy's level of attraction hadn't really occurred to her. Maybe it was because she subconsciously recognized him to be a horrid person both inside and outside of school and so simply passed his looks off to be superfluous; maybe it was because homework really was more important to her than human beings, so she naturally blocked out his appearance because A's were better than A-holes. Or maybe it was simply the fact he was her next-door-neighbor who constantly lost his cat, flirted with the elderly neighbors, and blared

his music at jarring volumes at ten o'clock at night, disturbing her study hours, and thus wasn't *supposed* to be physically appealing.

"He's not ugly, I guess," she finally said, titling her head at the obnoxious topic of their conversation. "But I wouldn't date him, either. Mostly because he's the worst human being in the world. Less because he has an earring and doesn't know how to sing."

Ally nearly spit her water all over herself.

"Oh my *gosh*," she choked. "Did you just say he *can't sing*?"

"He's horrid," Randy confirmed. "Trust me. Hargrove and Ratt just don't go together."

As if he could feel they were talking about him, Hargrove suddenly glanced in their direction.

All three girls dropped their faces. Ally and Nancy pretended to be engrossed with their food while Randy sucked the last droplets of milk from her carton, Ally muttering something about how "perfect" his eyes were while Nancy hushed her.

Randy half-expected him to come over and chew her out for staring, being his "dipshit" neighbor and all. But after a few minutes she could hear his posse continue their rabble-rousing, and glanced up to find him reclining in his seat, arm slung over Penny Baker and feet propped up on the table.

The girls glanced at each other and visibly relaxed.

"Did I mention that he's terrifying and unpredictable?" Nancy murmured.

"*Mysterious*," Ally corrected.

"I think his left eye is smaller than his right," Randy added.

Not much was said after that about Billy Hargrove. The girls contented themselves instead with miscellaneous gossip until Steve arrived to walk Nancy to her next class. Ally and Randy watched her go, Ally commenting on how she wished that she had a boyfriend to walk her to class, and Randy answering about how ungrateful she

was for Randy's company.

"You're great and all," Ally said, "but c'mon – what girl *doesn't* want a Harrington to walk her to class?"

And for once, Randy had nothing to say. Because as she watched Nancy and Steve melt into the pool of students as the bell chimed, she couldn't help the tug of desire in her own chest.

Sometimes Billy hated the superfluous atmosphere of high school. Other times, he relished in it.

Billy's move from California had done more for him than just change his surroundings and rip him away from what few good friends he had: it had opened his eyes to the real world.

California may be pictured as sunshine and oceans and beach babes, but Billy's home had reflected something a little different. That different was called shit, shit, and more shit. He hadn't realized how his "city life" and asshole father had made him grow up a little faster than the majority of the teenagers he knew until he had left his semi-comfortable bubble for Hawkins, Indiana. Sure, the town wasn't perfect. It had its bad parts, its bad kids, and its criminals. But it still didn't know what *really bad* was. Not like Billy.

This made the high school both a constant disappointment and a victory.

He hated the kids and their small-town mentalities. He hated their fake lives and their petty rebellion and their insatiable thirst for someone who was more than Hawkins, more than high school, more than just Harrington, the "King", the boring romantic jock. He hated their backwater ways, innocent lives, and quiet comfort.

But he also loved them for being so simpleminded. They were easy to please. Easy to control. Easy to manipulate.

And Billy loved control.

Not because it made him sexy or manly or badass or whatever it was that drove movie villains – he loved control because he loved being

on top. He loved putting the fear of God in the hearts of those who messed with him. He loved knowing that he was always going to win; that no one was going to challenge him, because no one dared to try.

Stealing Steve Harrington's spot on Hawkins High School's pedestal was the easiest thing he had ever done in his life. A few cigarette flicks, a few charming smiles, a few crushing games in basketball and Harrington was the wanna-be and Billy was the King. It had been so simple.

But while the victory still burned in his veins, he was undeniably bored. Frustrated. Antsy.

Billy reclined with his feet atop the table, wishing he had a cigarette in his mouth as the obnoxious laughter of the guys around him bounced off the cafeteria's walls.

It was great being the center of attention, but some days it just gave him a headache. Today was one of those days.

"You free Halloween?" Tina asked from beneath his arm.

He lazily turned her way.

"Sure," he said apathetically. "Got somethin' in mind?"

She cracked her gum with a flirtatious upturn of her lips.

"Halloween party. My place."

"Sounds like something to do." He gave her lazy wink. "Besides you."

One would have thought he'd just declared his undying love for her after rescuing her from some ridiculous smut novel scenario. She melted into him with a giggle, and ran her fingers up his thigh.

So easy to please, he thought with disgust.

She wasn't his first conquest. There were two others he'd already wooed and boored only a few nights ago, and both she had undoubtedly heard of. Still, she sidled up to him like a lost creature, and Billy knew the night was already won.

It was so easy, it was boring.

A prickling sensation from the back of his neck had him turning to stare across the cafeteria. Unsurprisingly, Nancy Wheeler, her friend, and that dipshit neighbor of his were watching him. They were muttering back and forth to each other, and he narrowed his eyes at them.

With a flinch, they practically glued their faces to their table. He smirked.

At one point he had thought about adding to Harrington's broken reputation by also snatching his girlfriend, but Billy had crushed the idea as quickly as it had come.

Not only was Wheeler the very opposite of his type, the amount of time and effort it would take to snag a girl with as prudish a reputation as hers was not worth the goal. The loss of Harrington's kingly status was painful enough. It dealt Billy a decent handful of entertainment with little to no effort.

Besides, Billy thought snidely, eyes wandering to Wheeler's left where, three tables over and tucked into a corner, the infamous recluse Jonathan Byers was sitting alone. *It won't be long before Wheeler and Byers are running off together.*

Harrington would really lose, then. And with half the effort on Billy's part.

4. Fabio: The Accidental Hero

"Are you sure you'll be alright walking home alone?" Nancy asked, packing up her books.

Randy waved her hand. "I'll be *fine*, Nance. I walk home all the time. And I know you and Steve have been looking forward to this for a while now, so go enjoy yourselves."

Ever since Barb's mysterious disappearance the year before, Nancy has had a hard time letting her friends wander off alone. Ally was less of a worry – her mom usually picked up her and dropped her off, and on the few occasions she couldn't, Ally would usually snag a ride with someone else. But Randy's general distance from her friends and her lack of a ride had made her a pretty stinging concern for Nancy. Which was touching, but Randy really *was* used to walking alone, even in the dark. Her parents' work left her without any other way home, so it was a reality for her that she had learned to accept.

Even so, Nancy wasn't letting it go. Face twisting, she glanced up to Steve with eyebrows rose, and Steve, always the "whatever you want, Nance" kind of guy, just shrugged.

"Not a big deal to me, Andy. If you need a ride home, it's only a few minutes out of the way." Nancy looked more imploringly at him, and he added quickly, "Besides, Nance is right. You shouldn't be walking home alone. Especially in the dark."

Nancy meant his words, but Randy could tell that Steve – as nice of a guy as he was – did not. And as great as a ride would be to escape the chilly autumn air, inconveniencing them seemed stupid when walking was something she was so accustomed to.

"It's alright, guys. I really don't mind." She slung her backpack over her shoulder. "See you tomorrow, Nance. Have fun on your date."

"But—" Nancy attempted, only for Randy to reply more pointedly,

"Bye Nancy."

She heard Steve ushering Nancy away, mumbling something about how "she'll be fine" and "she's tough enough to kick ass", which was pretty bracing for Randy who was barely five foot and had never hit a living creature in her life.

But the moment of pride lasted scarcely two minutes, because the moment she was outside the school's doors and the cold and the dark were around her, she felt like a puny child.

It was colder than she had expected it to be, for one thing, and for another there was a heavy fog descending, which always made the dark seem creepier and the walk seem longer. Add to that fact that she was given an ungodly amount of homework for the first time in weeks and it was killing her back, she wished she hadn't stayed so late to study with Nancy in the library.

Groaning, she stomped her way down the school steps like an angry two-year-old and began her long walk home.

"Should've just accepted the ride," she muttered to herself. "Should've done it."

Worse still, it was quieter than usual. There wasn't the customary thrum of insects or animals, cars, or people. Not even a breeze. Just a dead, chilly hush that settled into her bones.

Walking home in the dark wasn't usually awful. In warmer weather there were crickets and peepers and cars, people walking their dogs, teenagers milling about, and kids riding their bikes. Even the colder, chilly months of autumn and the frigid winter nights saw human activity, because even though it was dark it was still relatively early – only 4 o'clock, and people were getting out of work, going to dinner, and running errands. The general hub made it feel like she wasn't walking alone, like the darkness was only half there and anything that resided in it was barred away. But in this still silence it was like night had blanketed everything. She could hear the hum of the streetlights, the distant crack of bare tree limbs, the crunch of her own footsteps as if she were in an empty, dark room. Her breath was loud in her ears, her heart an unsteady thrum that bounced over her eardrums.

I'm not a sissy, she told herself. I can handle a simple walk home.

A sudden snap in the woods made her freeze.

She stared into the darkness of the entangled, naked limbs, the gnarled brown fingers that clawed at each other and reached towards the dimly lit street behind her, heart pounding, hairs on the back of her neck rising. Shadows seemed to shift and for one, horrified moment, she expected to see a pair of eyes leering at her from the depths. Her hands began to sweat and she tightened her grip on her backpack.

A breeze raked its fingers through the trees, causing a few remaining leaves to rattle.

She swallowed.

Okay, maybe she *was* a sissy.

Pulling her coat tighter and hiking the straps of her bag further up her shoulders, she bowed her head and continued down the road.

Maybe it was because Halloween was right around the corner, maybe it was her overactive imagination – whatever the reason, Andy couldn't shake the sensation that she was being watched. Followed. That every shadow along the walkway between her and the woods wanted to snag her, drag her into the darkness, make her disappear from Hawkins forever.

Like Barb.

"Calm down, idiot," she hissed to herself, legs beginning to shake. "It's just Hawkins. There's nothing to-"

She broke off as the brush across the road began to move.

She froze, legs turning to ice. The solitary streetlight above her, which only second prior had been casting her shadow across the dotted lines, began to flicker, the buzz of electricity fading and surging like a swarm of bees.

She opened and closed her mouth.

She swallowed.

Don't you dare call out. Don't you dare call out. Don't you dare—

Another rustle.

"Hello?" she squeaked.

You're a moron. You are such a moron. I can't believe you just did exactly what you weren't—

The bushes rustled some more. A strange, inhuman gurgling filled the air.

"You know what," she called shakily, backing away. "I'm *really* not interested in any Girl Scout cookies, so if you could just... you know... go away..."

The brush began to quake violently and the trees around it quivered.

The lamp flickered like a strobe, brightening and dimming and disappearing, a pulsating buzz that made her head spin and the street look like it was jumping closer. The noise grew, growled, a noise she had never heard before in her life.

Slowly the brush parted.

The light flashed blindingly bright and, for the merest second, revealed a hulking shadow before giving a loud *pop*. The street was thrown into darkness.

Randy's ragged breathing mingled with the strange, uneven noises of the creature across the street. She could see nothing. Could hear only her heart and her terror and the *thing* as it pushed its way from the woods.

But even though her head was screaming at her to *run*, her body was frozen. Just like in all those cheesy horror movies, when the character could have totally escaped, but instead only stared at the monster like an idiot, as if begging for a gruesome death. Except in this horror scenario, she could see nothing. It was just her staring dumbly at shadows and distant noises.

Then, like a snap of the fingers, the bulb flared back to life. She blinked away the shock, relief flooding her, but then quickly wished the light had stayed dead, because she was looking at something that could only exist in a Sci-fi flick.

The creature made its way across the dotted lines, the light slowly falling across its smooth, green body, its eyeless face, and Randy took a horrified step back.

"Holy bananas," she whispered.

The creature paused, seemed to sniff the air, and then, with a small gurgle—

Its face opened up.

And it let out a blood-curdling scream.

Rearing on its hind legs with its face split wide, rows of jagged teeth and strings of saliva barred, it began to run towards her.

Randy screamed.

A sudden flash of light came barreling down the road, and an engine growled. Randy barely caught a glimpse of the sleek Camaro as it hurled itself forward - the tires shrieked, a thump echoed in the air, and the creature was sent skidding across the pavement. Ten feet away, it laid very still.

For a moment, no one moved. The car sat purring, exhaust from its pipe rolling around it in a dense, smelly fog. Then the passenger door burst open, and an all-too familiar voice barked,

"What the *hell* are you doing, dipshit? *Get in!*"

Randy didn't need to be told twice. She scampered over to the car, threw herself into the seat, and slammed the door closed.

Billy stomped on the gas and the car shot forward. He swerved around the now-stirring body of the creature, and raced up the road at a speed that was totally illegal, yet totally inadequate for the situation.

As they raced down the dark street, neither of them spoke. The growling of the engine was the only noise that broke the silence as Billy stared intently ahead and Randy clung to the dashboard with rigid fingers, her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide.

Slowly, she turned to him.

"Did you... did you *see* that?" she whispered.

"Nooo," he replied sarcastically, puffing on his cigarette like it was an inhaler, "I only *hit it with my car*."

She looked forward again, dazed.

"You hit it."

"Hell yeah I did."

She swallowed.

"Why... why did you hit it?"

"Holy shit, are you really asking me this right now? It's not like it was your *dog*." He reached over and flicked on his radio, and Randy realized that his hands were shaking. Ted Nugent's raspy voice filled the cabin. "Fuck, it's not like it was on *purpose*. The damn thing was standing in the road – what the hell was I supposed to do?"

My baby like to rock, my baby like to roll.

My baby like to dance all night, she got no control–

"And why the hell are you so upset about it, anyway?" he snapped. "It was going to rip your face off! I know you're crazy and all, but shit — that's usually a pretty good sign that something *won't* make a good pet."

Randy pried her fingers from the dashboard and sat back in her seat, still floating in her mind. She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and realized that her hands and knees were quivering like a newborn fawn.

It's not like she was *mad* that he hit it. It was just— Well, to be honest, she wasn't sure what she felt. And for once in her life, she had nothing to say.

For the rest of the ride, neither of them spoke. Billy had slowed down enough so they were at least going a semi-normal speed, but he was still sucking on his cigarette like he might die if he stopped, and his fingers were voraciously drumming on his steering wheel, completely offbeat with Def Leppard. Here and there, his shoulders gave a nervous twitch.

Randy had settled enough into her seat to fiddle with the straps of her backpack, but every time they passed a particularly hulking shadow, her imagination went berserk and her fiddling turned back into grasping.

When they pulled into the Hargrove driveway ten minutes later, both were a nervous wreck. Even so, they were lucid enough to recognize how socially wrong it was for them to be in the same vehicle together. Shakily, Randy opened her door and threw her legs outside of the car.

"Hey," Billy snapped suddenly.

She glanced over her shoulder.

He was down to the very stub of his cigarette, but took one last desperate drag before flicking it out the window, hand quaking.

"We don't ever talk about this," he said sternly. "Ever. For all I care, I had one too many beers, maybe a joint or two, and you were just a hallucinating nerd-mess. Too many comics, too many movies—"

"I don't read comics."

"I don't give a shit what a freak like you does, Peters. You open your mouth, your *dead*. Got that?"

"Whatever you say, Fabio," she muttered, and climbed out of the Camaro.

Billy followed her and slammed his door shut.

"And don't call me that," he snapped.

"What?" she asked. "Fabio?"

"Yes."

"Sorry." She wasn't. "Thanks for the ride."

They stood there in silence a moment longer.

Finally, Billy stuffed his hands into his tight pockets, then made his way to the front door.

"See you in the morning, dipshit," he said.

"You too, Fabio."

5. Schedules, Puns, and Good Boys

The next day, Randy Peters didn't exist.

Even though Billy saw her in the halls with Wheeler, she wasn't there. Even though he passed her in the cafeteria, she was a ghost. Even though his seat was three away from hers in math, she was invisible. Even though that douchebag friend of Harrington's was messing with her while she was getting into her locker, there was nothing to see.

Just like any other day, Billy was King and Peters was dirt beneath his boots. And just like any other day, Billy was at peace with this arrangement.

And for good reason.

"A bear did *what* last night?" Wheeler screeched, and Billy, boots resting on the desk adjacent to his, lolled his head to the side to watch the explosion.

"It was fine, Nance," Peters said soothingly, scribbling in the brown planner she always carried with her. "I wrestled it with my bear hands and won."

After a moment of Wheeler staring at her in silence, Peter's lips stretched into a shit-eating grin.

"Get it?" she asked, raising her brows. "*Bear?* Like, you know, *bare?*"

Billy rolled his eyes and brought a hand up to massage his forehead. He almost pitied Wheeler.

"That's not funny, Andy!" Wheeler burst. "I was really worried that something had happened! I called three times. *Three times.*"

"I went to bed early," Peters replied lightly. "And it was funny. I'm hysterical. You know I came up with that off the top of my head? Talent."

Is that would you call it? Billy thought in disgust.

"Hey. Billy."

He turned his head. Tommy, Hargrove's boisterous, man-whore of a friend that daily messed with Peters, was leaning against the desk that Billy had his feet on. His arms were crossed beneath him, bearing his weight as he looked like God himself had graced Billy's presence.

"Tommy," Billy grunted.

He wasn't interested in whatever shit the guy wanted to start.

"Heard Tina invited you to the party," Tommy continued despite Billy's obvious disinterest. "You going?"

"If I feel like it," Billy muttered.

He had already told Tina he would go, and it hadn't been a lie. He was definitely going. It was something to do in that boring-ass town. But he didn't want Tommy to think he was interested in whatever shit he was offering – no need to feed his ego.

"If you decide to go," Tommy continued lazily, rising, "make sure you're prepared for a keg battle."

Billy snorted. "Sorry to disappoint, but it won't be much of a battle."

"Oh yeah?" Tommy's head inched to the side, a grin sliding across his freckled face. "And what makes you say that, Cali boy?"

"Cause I'm the Keg King," Billy drawled.

Billy was well aware that he was a dick at the best of times, but even he knew where to draw the line. The opposite could be said for Tommy, who was a grade-A asshole that had managed to earn Billy's deepest resentment. The guy had a smile that could freeze hell over, and he pulled stunts that Billy was far too restrained to pull.

No thanks to Tommy, Billy had learned that there was a big difference between his own controlled chaos and Tommy's abandoned recklessness. And while unease wasn't something Billy was entirely used to feeling aside from around his father, it had

become a constant companion in the presence of Tommy.

Not fear, obviously. Billy didn't scare easily. He was just mindful of the anarchy that seemed to control Tommy's day-to-day behavior. Mindful and annoyed.

"But you have a ride tonight, right?" Wheeler asked, drawing Billy's attention to the front of the classroom.

Peters shrugged.

"I mean, there must be *someone* who could drive you home," Wheeler pressed. "It's not like you live outside of Hawkins. If Steve wasn't pushed to get home to work with his dad, I *know* he would do it."

"It's really not a big deal," Peters said. "I already told you that I don't mind."

Billy pressed his eyes closed.

Nope, he told himself. *Nope, nope, nope.*

"But what if that bear comes back?" Wheeler asked. "What if it attacks you this time?"

Absolutely not, Billy. Don't you dare.

"I'll swing my bag at it," Peters replied.

"You're kidding me," Wheeler deadpanned.

Guilt was not a sensation Billy was entirely accustomed to, but he knew the horrid sensation when it did resurrect. And while he usually fought it off with little thought, he was finding it unusually difficult this time around.

"Really, Nance. I'm sure it was just a coincidence. I'll be fine."

Billy groaned and dipped his head back, too weak to let his usual asshole behavior wash away the liability that now seemed to hang over his head.

The two of them were the only ones that were aware of a monster's existence in Hawkins. So if something happened to Peters, it would no doubt come back on him. And while he hated her guts, he really didn't want that kind of culpability. Hell, knowing her, she would probably haunt him for the rest of his life.

The bell rang and the study hall filtered from the room. Billy hung back, pretending to fix his jacket, but he never got a chance to corner Peters. Wheeler and her other friends had flocked around her, escorting her out like she was some damned princess.

Shit, why did girls have to travel in groups?

Billy could have pushed past them to get to her, but the idea was nauseating. He had a tarnished reputation to keep up. He couldn't go around looking like some sympathetic loser who was friends with the dweebs.

He decided he would catch her before she left the school. Wrangling her somewhere private would be a hassle, but at least their talking would be in secret.

And if she says no? A voice grumbled in his head.

Well, if the dipshit refused, then that was her problem. He could wipe his shoes free of the issue and that was the end of his Peters trouble. Until then, he would just have to be as patient as he could manage.

But that proved more difficult than he had hoped.

In the hall, impatiently waiting by his locker, Billy watched Peters stuff books and papers into her bag. Apparently, she liked to organize her locker *every day*. Seriously, the thing was filled with shelves and sticky notes, and she had taken her good ol' sweet time in rearranging everything inside. Even her backpack was neatly filled, and probably one of the few in the school not filled with crap paper, lost and broken pens, and month-old lunch food and gym clothes.

Billy raised his watch in annoyance. He still had a good eight and a half minutes before Max would head out to his Camaro, so if Peters would just *hurry up*—

But just as she was zipping her bag and hoisting it onto her shoulders, one of the jocks that hung around Harrington came up to her.

Billy narrowed his eyes as they spoke. He couldn't hear a single word, but the body language was enough. Humiliation on the jock's part, patience on Peters'.

She was going to help the shithead with his homework.

Billy cussed under his breath and slammed his locker shut as the two made their way to the library. He lifted his watch again and sighed.

That dipshit was going to be the death of his neatly-kept schedule.

"Randy, you're a life saver," Michael said, shoving his history book into his bag. "Seriously, I was going to bomb that test. I think I at least have a fighting chance now."

"Yeah, yeah," Randy muttered. "But maybe next time you could try and make an appointment? Just a thought."

He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I'll let you know ahead of time next test, yeah?"

Randy glanced out the library window and exhaled. Cats hated Randy.

Randy hated cats.

Dark.

She had hoped that Michael was going to do his usual sit-down-for-ten-minutes-and-then-run-off thing, but for once in his miserable school career, he had actually decided to hang around for the full hour and a half session. Now it was dark and she had no ride home.

"Hey, Michael?" she began tentatively. "Do you think—"

But he was already halfway out of the library.

"See ya, Randy!" he called, giving a wave before backing out the doors with his usual sporadic energy.

Her shoulders slumped.

Just her rotten luck.

"I knew I shouldn't have told that horrible bear pun today," she said dejectedly, slowly making her way out of the library and down the long, dim hallway. "Now I've been cursed."

She shouldered her way out of the front doors and out into the cool night air.

Oh well, she thought somberly. At least if she died, she would die with dignity. She had upheld her duty as an honor student. She had taken care of her failing classmate, and because of her, the school basketball team may have just gained a shining player back onto its court.

The monster could have her body, but it could never have her patriotism.

"Hey, dipshit. I didn't wait for over an hour so you could just walk off and get eaten."

Randy froze.

She glanced over at the usually-empty parking lot. Hargrove's Camaro sat all by its lonesome, its shiny blue exterior melding with the dodgy shadow it was parked beneath. Hargrove was leaning against the side, puffing away on a cigarette, and he watched her form his perch with an expectant tap of his hand.

Randy made her way over to him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Where's your sister?"

Billy lowered his cigarette with a snap of his teeth, and he looked sharply at her.

"She's *not* my sister," he retorted. "And isn't it obvious? I've been

waiting for you, dipshit. Hurry up. I'm freezing my ass off."

He flicked the butt of his cigarette and shoved off the car. Throwing the door open, he slid inside.

But Randy didn't move. She was in a silent, tumultuous battle.

Riding with Billy Hargrove? Again?

Geez, something was off. They might be neighbors, but he definitely wasn't the type of guy to wait around for her so he could drive her home. And while he might have saved her from a sinister fate the previous night, he was no hero.

Randy froze as a thought struck her.

What if he was a serial killer, and he was planning on murdering her?

What if he was going to pull a horror movie scene and drive her out into the woods to filet her alive, then dump her body off where no one would find it until after the wildlife had enjoyed her tender, dead flesh?

What if—

"You just gonna stand there like a moron or what?" he called from inside the car.

Randy glanced through the window. She could see him with his forearm resting on the steering wheel, head titled towards her.

She pulled the door open.

"Are you a serial killer?" she asked bluntly.

Billy blinked at her.

"What?" he asked.

"Are. You. A. Serial. Killer?"

He gave her a look of complete disbelief.

"Are you shitting me right now?" he snapped. "I'm sitting here at five o'clock at night, freezing my ass off, so that I can give you a ride home when I have absolutely *no* obligation to, and you have the balls to ask me if I'm a *serial killer*?"

"Yes."

He scowled. "Get. In."

"That didn't answer my question."

"If you don't get in, I *will* murder you."

Randy opened her mouth. She closed it again.

"Good enough," she conceded.

She chucked her bag onto the floor and plopped into the passenger seat. Billy looked at her waspishly before starting the car. He revved the engine, put it in reverse, then made his way out of the parking lot in his typical chaotic fashion.

Randy kept trying to peek looks at him and their surroundings as they drove, just to make sure he really *wasn't* going to take her to a dark, creepy place and murder her. But they kept to the road the whole way home, and she was forced to concede that while he may be a creepy guy, he probably wasn't a serial killer.

"So, *bear* with me?" he asked suddenly.

Randy looked sideways at him. "You heard that?"

"Unfortunately for you, you said that shit loud enough for half the study hall to hear."

He stuck a cigarette between his lips and lifted his lighter to it. He took a few puffs, then removed it from his mouth, exhaling a cloud of smoke from his nose.

"Um, pardon me," she said snidely, crossing her arms, "but that 'shit' was actually a fantastic pun that I came up with off the top of my head. You're just jealous."

He chuckled and lifted his cigarette back to his mouth.

"Do you usually lie to yourself like this, Peters?"

"The only one lying here is you, Fabio."

He rolled his eyes towards her, blowing a stream of smoke into her face.

"Right. Because I would be jealous of telling the worst puns."

"The *best*."

"How do you even have friends?" he burst, lifting a hand from the wheel. "I mean, you're a complete idiot!"

"Telling puns doesn't make me an idiot."

"It's not just the puns," he argued, waving the hand. "It's the crap about the cat, and you're weird-ass-ness in general."

"Okay, first off, I don't get why you keep lying about the cat. If you were just honest about it, I'd leave you alone. Second—" She broke off, tapping a finger on her seatbelt. "Right. I'm weird. I don't really have an excuse for that, except for the fact that you're a complete weirdo, too. So it's the pot calling the kettle black."

"How many times do I have to say it to get it through your thick skull?" he demanded, looking hotly at her. "It's seriously *not my cat*."

"Then whose is it?"

"Hell if I should know! I always thought it was yours."

Randy hummed thoughtfully. "Weird. Must be Mrs. Slavaski's..."

Billy gave a sudden snap of his fingers, nearly popping out of his seat.

"That! Right there!" he exclaimed, and Randy drew back at his wide-eyed expression. "You didn't even *think* to ask Slavaski before stuffing the damned thing in my window! You're seriously insane! Who bangs on their neighbor's window and tries to force an animal on them

before even knowing its theirs?"

"Hey, I wasn't going to run around the whole neighborhood asking who's cat it was at six o'clock in the morning, okay?" she defended. "I hate cats, and there's one in my house almost every day when I get up. I don't know how, I don't know why, but it's there. And it didn't start happening until after you moved in, so I just assumed it was yours. Alright?"

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Billy muttered, "I'm *not* weird."

"That's what everyone says when they are."

"I have half the school fawning over me," he retorted. "I'm not."

"Come on, Hargrove. It's just a general consensus among Americans that Californians are weird, and you're like somebody took every single one, smooshed them into a tiny ball of madness, and then stuffed them into a person."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"My point is that you *are* weird. You're completely nuts. No one knows what you're going to say or do, and you usually choose the very last thing anyone would ever expect."

"Women usually find that hot."

"No, *bimbos* find that hot. Women with an IQ of an average human being find that stupid."

He snorted, lifted his cigarette, then inhaled.

"Alright, dipshit. Riddle me this: if we're so much alike, tell me why I'm king of the school and you're being bullied by Tommy every single day."

The question caught her off-guard.

Randy opened her mouth to answer, but for once her life she had nothing to say. Instead, she looked down at her hands.

Billy chuckled. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

She wasn't going to admit it, but the topic was a sore one.

Just because she played aloof didn't mean she didn't care that Tommy had crap to dish out to her every single day. She liked to think she was tough, but no matter sturdy one was, having someone tear them down every single time a chance was given was more than enough to bruise even the thickest of skins. Even hers.

She turned to look out the window, but she could still see his reflection. Cigarette hanging between his lips, hands tapping to the rhythm of the radio he always seemed to have running, hair wild and jaw firm.

"Yeah," she muttered, focusing on the dark trees instead. "Maybe we're different after all."

When they pulled into his driveway, Randy was more than ready to be home. She threw the door open and snagged her bag, but before she could close it, Billy stopped her.

"Listen good, alright?" he started firmly, removing his cigarette. "You be here, at this car, by seven o'clock sharp in the mornings. And I mean on the *dot*. I gotta get Max to school by seven fifteen, and there's no way in hell I'm gonna be late. After school, you meet me back at this car in the school parking lot by three ten. No earlier, no later. Don't need you hangin' around the car for everyone to see, and Max has to be home early enough to finish her homework. On Fridays I drop her off at the arcade, so expect to be home a few minutes later. Got it?"

Randy blinked.

"Hey dipshit," he snapped. "Talkin' to you."

"Oh, uh..." She tried to collect herself. "Are you— I mean, it just *sounds* like it, but— are you offering me *rides*? Like, every day?"

"No, I'm just telling you what time to meet me at my car because I like you knowing my daily schedule," he retorted satirically. "Uh, no duh, dipshit. Of course I'm going to give you rides."

It was a sweet opportunity, but...

Well, she couldn't help it. She was still festering over the Tommy comment.

"No thanks," she said bluntly, slamming the door closed.

Billy shut off the car and she heard the keys jangle as he climbed out.

"Say no all you want, Peters, but I swear to God I'll drag your ass here if I find you walking!" he barked behind her.

She spun around, walking backwards as she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Mature," he muttered, shaking his head and heading to his front door, "Real mature."

He took the last second before shutting it behind him to flip her the bird, and Randy grumbled threats under her breath.

6. Going Soft

Billy wasn't sure how he felt when he went to start his Camaro the next morning and found Peters leaning against the side of it with her bag sitting at her feet. She was bundled up, arms wrapped around herself, and her cheeks were a bright red from the cold.

Obviously she had been waiting there a while.

She glanced up at him with a half-dazed look as he approached, and he paused, hands on his hips to give her an appraising look.

"Well, well. If it isn't the dipshit," he said. "I see you took my advice."

She shrugged, but her expression was sheepish.

"Guess I didn't want you to dragging me into your car," she said, wrinkling her nose. "That would have been kind of weird."

The thought of that going down was a little disturbing in his mind. A guy dragging a girl into a car probably wouldn't look so good from the outside — funny as hell, definitely, but not good.

Still, it hadn't really occurred to Billy if he had actually meant his words. When he said them, they were meant to be more of a threat than anything. But he suddenly found himself wondering if he would have *really* dragged her into his car, or if he would have simply shrugged her off and went on his way.

Exhaling, Billy threw open his door, slid inside, and stuffed the key into the ignition. He heard the passenger door open and watched as Peters slid the seat forward.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"It's for Max," she said, as if his question was stupid. "Not gonna make her climb all over the place to get in."

Sure enough, Max stomped out of the house a minute later. Her skateboard was tucked under her arm as usual, her red hair flat and as unimpressive as ever in its appearance. She stopped when she saw

Peters standing there, and her eyes flickered to him.

"Uh..." she trailed. "Who's this?"

"Randy," Peters introduced promptly, sticking out her hand. "But you can call me Andy. Everyone else does. Except for Fabio here," she indicated to Billy, who was pulling out a cigarette. "He just calls me dipshit. And unfortunately for us, we'll both be passengers in this death trap with him."

No better introduction could have been made. Max smiled for the first time in front of Billy since their first-time meeting. She took Peters' hand, looking more pleasant than he had seen her look in two years.

An irritation swelled in him at the sight, and he stuffed his hand into his pocket to snag his lighter.

"Alright, you two shits," he snapped around his cigarette, flicking his lighter to life. "Get in or you're both walking. Don't got time for your formalities."

Max's small offer of life disappeared immediately, and the irritation in Billy deflated just the slightest. She climbed behind the seat and settled into the back, and Peters shoved her place back into its rightful position and got in.

"Alright, Billy Wonder," she muttered, holding her bag in her lap. "Try not to kill us."

Billy didn't bother to answer. He shook his head, turned up the radio, then shoved the gear into reverse.

Ratt's Round and Round swelled in the cabin as he sped down the road, and he reclined in his seat. Other than the music and the growl of the engine, it was silent. No one spoke. Not Max, not Peters.

In fact, Peters was unusually quiet. It wasn't a bad thing, not for Billy, but he would be lying if he said it didn't weird him out. She usually had something stupid to say or some comment to make, but just as always, she was unreadable, unpredictable, and completely indifferent to his presence.

And it bothered him.

Pulling his cigarette from his lips, Billy tipped his head in her direction and exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"You're welcome," he said, rolling his cigarette between his fingers. "For the ride."

Her gaze slid to him.

"You *did* threaten me," she responded coolly.

He lifted a shoulder.

"Yeah, but you *did* respond." He licked his lips and took another draw. He pushed the smoke through his nose. "It could have gone either way, yet here you are."

She turned fully to him, and Billy, sparing her more than a glance this time, noticed she had dark circles beneath her eyes.

"*Thank you*," she said with obvious sarcasm, "for your generosity."

A pregnant pause followed this, and Billy tasted his next words before releasing them.

"Didn't sleep?" he asked.

There was no concern. It was just a question.

She drew in a breath and dropped her gaze.

"Not really," she said, with equal unconcern. "Sometimes it happens."

Another pause.

Billy stubbed out his cigarette butt on the ashtray that sat on his dash and rested his wrist on the steering wheel.

"So I heard you got invited to Tina's party tonight, being Wheeler's friend and all." He tilted his head towards her again. "You goin'?"

She made a face. "Not really my thing... parties."

"That's a shame."

"I disagree."

"What, you don't like stupid teenager shit?"

Peters laughed.

"No, not really," she said.

Billy hummed, sounding sarcastically disappointed.

"That's too bad," he murmured.

They had reached the school, and he slid smoothly into his usual parking space. At that point, it had become his designated spot. No one parked there. No one dared to. And Billy had no complaints as he shut the engine off, directly in front of the high school so there was minimum walk for him and a nice exerting jog for Max.

They all stepped out, Peters taking extra care to move fast and low so no one saw her. It would be best for both of them if they weren't seen together.

"Have a nice day at school, Max," Peters said, as Max dropped her skateboard on the asphalt.

It was probably the first time in a long time that Max had been told that. What, with Susan and his dad being gone so often, Billy was the only one to see her in the mornings before school. And there was no way in hell he'd tell her to have a good day.

Max's lips inched back just the slightest.

"Thanks. You too."

Billy let Peters have a head start before he made his way to the school. He was surprised how nonchalant she was about the whole thing; she didn't kick up a fuss about pretending they didn't know each other, didn't argue about avoiding him. She just did it. He didn't even have to tell her to.

Maybe she wasn't such a dipshit after all.

Tina was the first to greet him when he was inside.

"Hey Billy," she purred, sashaying her way towards him. All thoughts of Peters were gone. "New jeans?"

"Nope," he answered.

Every day she asked the same question. Every day he gave the same answer. But he pretended not to notice; it was her roundabout way of telling him that his ass looked nice, and who was he to argue?

Slinging his arm over her shoulders, he walked with her through the hall.

"So, you coming tonight?" she asked. She trailed her fingers across his chest, and Billy grinned down at her.

"Where else would I be?" he replied smoothly.

"Morning Tina," Carol called from her locker as they passed, cracking her gum as she fiddled with her hair.

She was looking directly at Billy.

"Carol," Tina answered, though she said it crisply. "See you in Denora's."

The two were "friends", but like any other shallow high school relationships, they played off each other's weaknesses. Tina used Carol's slightly less attractive features to her advantage, Carol used Tina's rebounds to hers. Everyone knew they hated each other. They didn't try to hide it.

Billy wasn't much a fan of Carol's, either. Though it wasn't so much *her* that he didn't like. Tommy was her shadow; wherever she was, he was. When she was fooling around with other guys, it was because it was Tommy's permittance. She was his doll, and neither Tommy nor Carol would argue otherwise. So even though she gave him looks that spoke *volumes* of the plans she had for Billy, he played aloof. He refused to be Tommy's tolerance. If he was going to have something,

it would be *his*. Not anyone else's.

Maybe it was this hatred for Tommy that drew his attention in the hallway when it otherwise would not have been.

Leaning against the locker beside Peters, Tommy was refusing to let her open hers. Every time she'd pry the door open, he'd slam it shut with a peeling laugh. His freckled face was stretched wide in a grin that made Billy's stomach sour and his fingers curl. And though he tried his damndest, he couldn't overlook the exhausted, unamused expression on Peters' face.

Her words were clear: *very funny*. But it didn't matter how many times she opened the door, Tommy slammed it shut almost as swiftly.

Despite the irritation boiling in his gut, Billy kept walking.

He forced his attention away, forced his thoughts back on Tina who was chattering about her usual gossip.

Stay calm, hotshot, he told himself, exhaling shakily. *There's a time and a place for everything.*

Tommy would get his comeuppance.

Just not today.

7. Bullies, Deals, and Parties

Randy had just finally accomplished her locker combination and opened the door when it was promptly slammed shut again, narrowly missing her fingers.

"Hey *Peters*."

She closed her eyes and inhaled.

Stay calm. Stay calm. Stay calm.

It was a daily mantra, at this point. But while she should have been used to the grating voice, to the vexing stunts, to the face she was about to acknowledge, she wasn't. She didn't think she ever would be.

Slowly she turned to Tommy, who was perched beside her with his typical smirk. Arm half-over her head as he braced himself against the locker beside her, legs crossed in a lackadaisical manner, the quintessential picture of everything she had come to despise about school. He was like a walking, talking personification of her frustrations and insecurities. And to make matters worse, he knew it.

"Tommy," she replied coolly.

Sometimes it was bewildering to her how his expression managed to look so cheerful when his eyes were anything but. Like inky pits of acid, they were hot, sludgy, and always burning with some sort of chaos. He was unpredictable. He was cruel. Yet everything he did, he did with a smile.

"Heard you were invited to Tina's party tonight," he said casually, and slammed her locker closed again when she tried to open it.

"Yeah, but unfortunately for you, I don't plan on going. So you're going to have to find someone else to torment for the night," she replied, and forced the door open beneath his palm.

Tommy moved closer and gave it a rattling bang, forcing Randy to jerk her hands away.

"That's too bad," he murmured, leaning down, "because I was looking forward to seeing you."

"Ugh. Isn't it past trash collection time?" she muttered in disgust.

"Getting funnier every day, aren't you?" He tilted his head. "Or maybe just uglier. I can't really tell."

"Don't worry, I'm getting funnier. But you? Not so much."

His gaze flickered down, and his grin grew feral.

"You have Algebra first period, yeah?" he asked.

Randy suddenly remembered that her backpack was at her feet, wide-open for the picking.

"Wai—"

But it was too late. Tommy had stuffed his hand inside and emerged with her Algebra homework – the same homework that had taken her until one in the morning to finish.

"Tommy," she growled. "Don't."

"What are you going to do?" he mocked, holding it above her head. "Pun me to death?"

"Seriously, Tommy—" She jumped for it, but he lifted it just a bit higher. "I *really* need—"

"You know, you might want to choose your words more carefully next time, Peters," he said lazily, grabbing the paper with two hands. "Maybe I'd be more merciful."

Riiiiip.

Randy watched her homework fall to the ground in pieces.

Tommy laughed, slapped her on the shoulder, then walked away, his mirth bouncing off the walls.

As was usual, the overall reaction in the hallway was the pretense of

having not seen a thing. Sometimes it was mercy, sometimes it was simply annoying. At that moment, Randy was glad for it.

She bent down and scooped up the scraps, hoping to piece them back together, but some had fallen into muddy footprints and others were torn so oddly that there was no helping them. After a few minutes of this, she decided to give up.

Hopefully Mrs. Simmons would understand.

"Miss Peters?" Mrs. Simmons asked, stopping in front of her desk ten minutes later.

Her hand was outstretched, waiting patiently for Randy to hand in her usually finished and on-time homework, but Randy could only force a smile.

"Sorry, Mrs. Simmons," she said quietly. "Not today."

The older woman gave her a look but continued down the row of desks. It was Randy's first time failing to turn in her homework, and it was all Tommy's fault.

"Hey, you okay?" Nancy asked from beside her.

"Fine," Randy replied with as much sincerity as she could muster, which, judging by the look on Nancy's face, wasn't a whole lot. "Forgot my homework."

Nancy's eyebrows shot up. "Are you sure that's all? You look awful..."

"Gee. Thanks."

"I didn't mean it *that* way--"

They fell silent when Mrs. Simmons brushed past them to make her way back to the front of the class. Once she was out of earshot, Nancy leaned in.

"We'll talk at lunch," she said.

"There's nothing *to* talk about," Randy muttered.

"At. Lunch."

Nancy gave her a pointed look, and Randy silently conceded. There wasn't much use in arguing – she would end up talking whether she wanted to or not.

Three periods later, grumbling annoyedly, Randy made her way to the cafeteria. She was trying to figure out how she was going to explain her lack of homework to Nancy without mentioning Tommy. It was a little secret she had always managed to keep from her friend, and she had no plans on revealing it over a math paper.

As she made to round a corner, she was suddenly snagged by the arm and jerked into a room.

A door slammed and her back slammed into a wall, and as she blinked the surprise from her eyes and the sparkles muffling her vision in the otherwise pitch of the room, she realized that she was, in fact, in a closet.

It wasn't the most comforting situation to suddenly find oneself in, being shoved unexpectedly into a small place. And for Randy, who began to suddenly panic that Tommy had taken his teasing a step *too* far, it was extremely disconcerting. But luckily for her, Steve decided shed some light on the situation.

Literally.

A flashlight kicked on and Steve's face, not but a few inches from her own, lit up.

They stood in silence for a moment, staring at each other. Randy's mouth was open just the slightest, and Steve looked perfectly calm with his hair spilling into his eyes and the flashlight under his chin.

"You know, I *really* hate to ask – mostly because a part of me doesn't want to know the answer – but..." she trailed, leaning back. "What are you doing?"

"Uh, waiting to talk to you," he answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Duh."

"Waiting to talk to me would usually involve standing beside my locker or sitting at my table at lunch, *not* pulling me into a suspiciously smelly and, uh, *dark*, closet."

"Hey, hey, hey –" He lifted a finger defensively. "It's definitely *not* what you think, alright? I need your help."

"Yeah, you *seriously* need help."

He shined the light in her eyes.

"OW. Okay, okay. Geez." She covered her face, and he moved the beam away. "What do you want?"

Steve suddenly became quiet. She lowered her hands.

He was looking at the ground, his face shadowed and dim from the dingy flashlight, but his expression was clear as day.

Randy crossed her arms and leaned against the wall.

"Nancy, huh?" she asked.

He bit his cheek, nodded.

"Did you apologize?" she asked. "Buy her something nice? Take her out? I don't know – show your sincerity?"

But Steve waved his hands, the light flitting around the small space.

"No, no – it's nothing like that," he said quickly. "She's not mad at me or anything, it's just..." He inhaled. "Look, I know you two are good friends, and I know you've got your head on your shoulders. I don't trust Ally or anyone with stuff like this, ya know? I need some solid answers. But I can't ask *her* because... because I can't."

"Alright, Romeo. Spit it out."

He sighed.

"Look, I love Nancy. I mean, I *really* love her. I'm crazy about her. I'm serious about her. Our relationship isn't just some– some– I don't

know, casual school fling or something. I'm sincerely—" He broke off and threw a hand over his face. "Alright, if you repeat *any* of this, Randy, your ass is grass. Got it?"

She stared at him.

"Okay, okay." He took a few seconds to collect himself. Then, "I'm going to propose."

Randy wasn't surprised.

"It's a big deal, right?" he pressed.

"Sure," she replied. "I just don't get why you need me."

"Because!" He threw his hands up, the light sputtering from the movement. "I need *tips*, I need to know if she feels the same, I need— Geez, I need *intel*!"

Randy rested her chin on her hand. "You asking me to spy on Nancy for you?"

He grimaced.

"Kiiiinda?"

A moment of silence.

"Alright, Harrington," she finally conceded. "But if I'm going to spy on Nancy for you, I need something in return."

"*Anything*."

"I need you to tell Mrs. Simmons that you stole my homework to cheat off of, and then lost it."

Steve gave her a look.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked. "You're literally holding a pendulum over my head and you ask me to *lie* about your *homework*?"

"If you don't want to do it, not a big deal to me," she said casually, reaching for the doorknob. "I mean, I'm sure you'll figure out how

Nancy feels eventually—"

Steve slapped her hand away from the knob, and she retracted it.

"Alright, I'll do it," he confirmed. "Just don't get why it has to be *that*, of all things. So stupid. I mean, has anyone ever told you how weird you are?"

"Once or twice," she said even-toned. "Has anyone ever told you that your hair is bigger than your head?"

"Hey, hey. The hair is an art form."

"Or just ninety percent ego."

Steve opened his mouth. He shut it.

"Touché, Peters."

They both parted from the closet and Steve tossed the flashlight back inside. Then he exhaled, ran a hand through his hair, and gave her a pointed look.

"Don't forget," he warned her. "Or I'll tell Mrs. Simmons I lied."

"Cool your jets, Harrington. You'll get your intel."

He made sure to settle her with one final your-ass-is-grass-if-you're-lying stare before slipping from the hallway.

Randy made sure to wait a few minutes, then checked both ways before heading to the cafeteria.

The last thing she needed was Tommy catching her and Steve coming out of a closet together. *That* would make for a wonderful story about the A average, good-girl Randy Peters.

Nancy was already at the table when she finally sat down with her tray of food. Unlucky for her, Steve was seated with his friends three tables over, staring at her from overtop Nancy's head.

Persistent.

"Where have you be *been*?" Nancy demanded.

"I had to talk to Mrs. Simmons about something," Randy lied smoothly, opening her carton of milk and stuffing a straw into it.

"You mean about your missing homework?" Nancy pressed, and Randy knew she wasn't getting out of the math-issue so easily.

"Okay, *mom*," Randy muttered. "There was an incident, but it's all settled. Just a small case of misplaced math, is all."

"That doesn't explain your appearance."

"What are you talking about? I look great."

"Not really," Ally butted in.

Randy shot her a glower.

"Did you even sleep last night?" Nancy asked around her fork of spaghetti. "You look like shit."

There was no point in lying, Randy figured, so she shrugged indifferently.

"Not really," she answered. "Just a rough night. Homework, you know?"

"Or your parents?" Ally butted in again, and Nancy pressed her lips together and set her fork down.

"Did they not come home? Again?" she asked.

Randy lifted a shoulder.

"You know you can talk to us, right?" Nancy asked, tone gentle.

"I know."

It was a lie. She loved Nancy and Ally, but no – she couldn't talk to them.

They didn't understand. Both were cushy in their large houses with

parents that were always around. They could fall asleep without having to worry about the phone ringing to tell them that mom and dad would be staying at the lab again, or the doorbell chiming to tell that mom and dad were finally home, even though it was one in the morning.

They didn't have to scramble to spend time with their creators; they didn't have to sit around an empty dinner table every morning and night; they didn't have to call a secretary to find out if mom and dad would be home for the weekend or working over.

They didn't understand.

And it was okay. Randy didn't want them to. In fact, she didn't think anyone should have to feel the way she did. It was unfair and cruel in an already dim and lonely world to not have parents around. But that didn't make it any easier to talk to them about it.

She glanced up, and Steve was dramatically motioning from her to Nancy and then to himself.

"You know what?" Nancy asked suddenly, pushing her tray away. "You need to get out of the house. You're alone way too much, and it's time you hang out with your friends for a night."

No. No, no, no, no—

"Yeah, Tina's party is tonight!" Ally exclaimed and leaned forward excitedly. "We can dress you up, dance for a few hours, eat good food, drink some booze..."

"Um, *no*," Randy laughed humorlessly. "No. Absolutely not."

"Oh, come ooonnn," Nancy whined. "You'll have so much fun!"

"*No*, I *won't*. You both know I *hate* parties."

"Okay, but it's a Halloween party," Ally corrected. "So it'll be different. There will costumes and candy and games—"

"—Idiotic teenager stunts, alcohol, drugs, sex," Randy interjected, stuffing her mouth with forkfuls of meatball. "No."

"But you know Tina's parents." Nancy straightened in her seat. "They definitely won't allow anything crazy."

"They're out of town, Nance," Randy pointed out. "They don't really have much of a say in what goes on."

"You're going," Ally stated.

"I'm getting sick," Randy lied.

"You'll survive the night," Nancy replied coolly.

"I don't have anything to wear," Randy tried again.

"I have lots. You can borrow something of mine."

"I have homework?" Was Randy's last resort.

"And you'll have it done on time, as usual," Nancy answered easily.

Defeated.

Randy sighed and laid her head down on the table.

"Ah, c'mon, Andy," Nancy cooed, rubbing her back. "You won't be alone, you'll get to dance, play some games, giggle with your girlfriends... It'll be fun. And then Steve and I will drop you off at home at a decent hour, you can finish up your homework, and it'll be great."

Randy groaned.

"Speaking of the party," Ally said suddenly, "I heard you invited Byers."

It was Nancy's turn to sidestep.

"Oh, yeah," she said, with a shrug as if it was nothing. "I thought he could use the company. He's always with his mom and brother, you know?"

Randy turned her face so she was looking at Steve's table.

He had bent down to peer around Nancy's arm. His hands were straight, motioning from himself to Nancy, then to her with a very pointed look.

"You invited Jonathan?" Randy asked, sitting up. "That was nice of you."

"I thought so," Nancy said quickly. "He's overlooked so much."

"I wonder why," Ally muttered.

All of their gazes turned to the corner of the cafeteria where Jonathan sat alone, inhaling his food, presumably to run to the dark room for the last few minutes of lunch.

Shaking her head, Ally stood and said something about finding "the girls" and left the table. She wasn't Jonathan's biggest fan. After the picture fiasco from the previous year, she firmly believed that he was a creepy stalker, and probably knew exactly what happened with Barb but was simply not talking. Randy didn't blame her. But Nancy was very defensive of him, so they had both learned to tread lightly on the topic.

Something had happened between them, Randy knew, that Nancy wasn't saying aloud. Whether it was romantic or otherwise, the two had a connection. A strong one. And while they didn't often talk, their sneaky glances left plenty of room for speculation.

Now that Ally was gone, Randy decided it was time to uphold her end of the bargain. If not for her own curiosity, then at least to get Steve – who looked like a middle school cheerleader waving his arms around – off her case.

"Sooo," she said casually, stretching her arms out. "How are you and Steve?"

"Huh?" Nancy looked up. "Oh, we're good."

Not a promising answer. Randy didn't miss the flicker of Nancy's gaze, either, which couldn't seem to keep off Jonathan, who was now carrying his tray back to the front of the cafeteria.

"Alright," Randy said sternly, scooching her chair closer to Nancy. "I want the truth."

Nancy blinked. "What truth?"

"You and Jonathan."

"*What?*" Nancy laughed. "No. No, no, no. *Nothing* is going on between Jonathan and I."

Randy stared at her.

"I swear! Nothing is going on between us. We're just... just friends. And..." She watched him exit the cafeteria, their gazes meeting briefly. "I like his company. And I feel bad that he's always alone and stuff."

Randy peeked around Nancy at Steve, hoping he wasn't witnessing anything, but he was now enthralled with his buddies who were busy tossing apple slices at each other like seven-year old's.

"Seriously," Nancy continued, and started to gather her things. "Nothing is going on between me and Jonathan."

Randy pretended to agree. But in the back of her mind, she was wondering how exactly she was supposed to explain to Steve that perhaps proposing wasn't the best course of action. Not yet, at least.

Not with Jonathan in the picture.

8. Friends are Always There

Billy lit his cigarette and dropped his weight against his car, exhaling moodily into the chilly autumn air.

Max was late.

Again.

She was riding towards him on her skateboard, face flushed from the cold and hair whipping behind her. Her expression was as pleasant as his was as she met his gaze from across the parking lot, which was enough to set off his already touchy temper.

He ground his teeth and rolled his cigarette between his fingers, trying to keep himself under control.

Part of his problem, he knew, was the fact that it wasn't really Max's fault that he was so pissed. She was an easy target at that point – a nice scapegoat. The real reason was even more irritating to think about than getting home three and a half minutes later than they were supposed to, even though he really didn't want to admit it. Still, as much as he tried to fight it, he couldn't get Tommy and Peters out of his head.

He groaned as he dropped his head back, letting the smoke fill his lungs until they burned, then releasing it all in a single exhale.

Why did it bother him so much?

It was only Peters. Only Peters and Tommy. He hated Tommy, so that was fine. But he really didn't have a reason to get so pissed over the fact that Peters was being bullied. Honestly, he shouldn't give a damn. He was supposed to hate her, too. But the more he thought about it, the more irate he got. And he even though he tried to ignore it floating in the back of his head, it had nagged at him all day. And he was exhausted.

And he was *pissed*.

He tried to tell himself it was all because of Tommy. The guy was an

asshole – anything he did was irritating. He tried to tell himself that Peters was shit and he didn't care; that he was just looking for a reason to duke it out with the freckle-faced jock that Harrington called a friend, and that Peters had nothing to do with the reason at all.

But nothing helped.

Still, it nagged. Still, he couldn't wrap his mind around it.

And it was driving him nuts.

Maxed rolled up to the Camaro and popped her skateboard with her foot.

"You're late, Maxine," Billy snapped.

"Sorry," she mumbled, tucking her board beneath her arm and making her way to the car.

Lifting his watch, Billy ground his teeth.

"Where the hell is she?" he burst, staring at the entrance of Hawkins High School.

She was supposed to show three and a half minutes ago, and she still wasn't there. He told her that she wasn't allowed to be late; he *warned* her.

Geez. He hated her so much.

"Uh, Billy?" Max called from the passenger seat.

"What?" he growled.

"Andy isn't coming with us today," she said, and dropped her skateboard and backpack on the floor of the car.

"The hell you talkin' about?"

"She said she was going home with..." Max closed her eyes, thinking.
"Oh, yeah – she said she was going home with Nancy Wheeler. She

said something about not wanting to tell you because everyone would see? I dunno."

Billy dropped his wrist and cursed. He flicked his cigarette and shoved off his car. Opening the driver's side, he dropped into his seat and slammed the door as hard as he could.

"I hate that dipshit," he muttered angrily, revving the engine.

Randy could have been doing homework; maybe making up for the paper that Tommy tore up for math, maybe studying for the huge chemistry test. But instead she was staring at herself in the mirror.

And she was horrified.

"Come on, Nance!" she called, tugging at the shirt. "I can't wear this!"

"Why not?" Nancy asked, emerging from her closet with a pair of boots. "You look great!"

"What if I ruin it?"

"Andy, it's just an outfit."

"But it's *expensive*," Randy whined. "And I'm a total klutz. It'll be stained and gross by the end of the night."

Nancy gave her look.

"I'm serious!"

"It's just an outfit, Andy, which means that it can be replaced. But you, your night, your enjoyment – they can't. This is probably the only party you will ever go to, and you look great, and you're going to have a good time. If something happens to the clothes – what the hell. At least your night wasn't spent alone, right?"

Randy shuffled in front of the mirror.

It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for her. Other than Billy running over a huge creature that was going to eat her, of

course. But then again, that was an accident.

"Thanks," she said.

She didn't want to go to the party, but if Nancy was so stuck on it, she might as well try and enjoy a few hours with her girlfriends. Even if everyone was going to be sweaty, drunk, and high on hormones.

"Listen," Randy began, sitting on Nancy's bed. "I'm sorry for pushing you earlier. About Jonathan and everything."

"It's okay," Nancy said, sitting beside her. "I get it. I mean, Jonathan Byers?" She laughed, though her smile was barely there. "It's crazy."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

Nancy glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you've been acting... odd. Upset? I guess." Randy shrugged. "I thought maybe because of Barb, but..."

Nancy pressed her lips together and fiddled with her hands.

"The truth..." she began hesitantly. "The truth is, I just... I just *feel* like it's *my* fault that Barb... disappeared. I mean, I was there. I told her to go home, you know? I was... I was being a bitch. Selfish. And then she just... was gone."

Randy had honestly not imagined the issue to be Barb. She knew that Nancy thought about her – a *lot* – but she had just assumed the problem to be Steve. Or Jonathan.

Now she felt bad.

"Hey, it's not your fault, Nance," Randy said soothingly. "I mean, if you were there – what would have happened, then? Both of you could be gone, you know? And then what? We wouldn't know anything. Steve probably wouldn't have opened his mouth. You guys would just be gone."

Nancy's face scrunched.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I just—"

A honk came from outside, and both of them jumped.

"Nance?" Mrs. Wheeler called from outside the door. "Steve is outside waiting for you."

"Coming!" Nancy called back.

Slapping her hands on her thighs, she exhaled and lifted herself from the bed. She gave Randy a forced smile.

"You ready?" she asked.

"No," Randy answered.

She felt like she was going to vomit just thinking about it.

"It'll be great," Nancy said, though she didn't really sound like she meant it. "We'll have some fun, act like stupid teenagers for the night... "

She paused.

"We'll do it for Barb."

"Yeah," Randy said, forcing her own smile. "For Barb."

9. The Halloween Party

"39... 40... 41... 42..."

The crowd screamed as Billy lifted his head away from the empty keg, spitting out the last of the alcohol into the air.

"42!" Michael announced over the cheers, and Billy took his cigarette from him, chest expanding as he inhaled smoke. "We have got ourselves a new. Keg. KING!"

Billy's head spun as his name roared from every direction. He pulled his cigarette from his lips, high from the adrenaline, and yelled, *"That's how you do it, Hawkins! That's how you do it!"*

The sound of his name being chanted was like fire in his veins. He could feel every syllable, could taste every letter.

And he held nothing back.

He reveled in the limelight. He basked in the adoration. Sweat dripped from his chest and beer rolled down his chin, and he lifted his cigarette high into the air as he took a long drag. The alcohol was buzzing in his skull, the smoke burning in his lungs, and he felt like a damn *king* as he made his way through the crowd, people slapping his shoulders and thumping his back.

Mötley Crüe's "Shout at the Devil" poured from the open door of Tina's house as he and Michael stepped through. It was hot and crowded inside, clumped with dancers and couples and people too wasted to move, and Billy rested his cigarette between his lips as he picked his way through the bodies.

The place was a mad house. Toilet paper clung to the rafters, balloons rolled across the dance floor, and the smell of booze, tobacco, and perspiration hung in the air. It was both disgusting and exhilarating all in one go, and it reminded him of the parties him and his friends used to throw back in California. Hot, riled, hormone-induced parties that lasted until the crack of dawn, or until the cops showed.

Billy grinned.

Maybe Hawkins wasn't entirely a shithole, after all.

"Better tell King Steve that he's just been dethroned from the keg," Ryan said from behind him, and Billy followed his finger.

Harrington was leaning against a wall with Wheeler beside him, sunglasses masking his expression and hands tucked into his pockets. Lackadaisical, suave – he was the very picture of a pompous ass who knew he ran a school.

Billy ran his tongue over his teeth, suddenly excited to watch Harrington tumble off his pedestal.

"We've got ourselves a new keg king, Harrington," Michael said, slapping Billy on the back as they came to a halt in front of the couple.

"Yeah, that's right!" someone yelled from behind.

"Eat it, Harrington," Ryan said from Billy's other side.

Harrington whipped off his sunglasses.

"Is that so?" he muttered.

"42 seconds," Billy replied coolly. "Sorry to disappoint, *King Steve*. Heard you only managed 56."

Harrington clenched his jaw.

"Rematch."

The boys wolf-whistled at the offer, and Billy knew that he had struck a nerve.

He smirked.

"I dunno," he murmured smoothly, gaze flickering over Harrington's shoulder. "Doesn't sound like you're too good with your alcohol, Harrington. And *someone's* gotta babysit Wheeler."

She wasn't looking too happy to begin with, but now she looked straight-up pissed. And she was heading right for the punch bowl.

"The hell you talkin' about, Hargrove?" Harrington snapped.

Billy simply jerked his chin and Harrington, scowling, looked over his shoulder at the kitchen. Wheeler was digging a plastic cup into the alcohol-riddled punch, dribbling froth all over the floor.

"Shit."

Billy lifted his cigarette to his lips as Harrington spun around and made his way over to Wheeler. The boys behind him were howling with laughter.

"Steve the babysitter," Michael burst.

"It's pathetic," Billy agreed loudly.

But Harrington was too enthralled with his girlfriend to notice.

"Can we go home now?" Randy asked for the hundredth time.

Ally, who was enthralled with her can of beer, took another swig.

"We've barely been here two hours," she said, brows puckering as she wiped her chin. "Have a drink, play some games, dance!"

But Randy was miserable.

There were far too many people, it smelled awful, felt like an oven, and all she wanted to do was sit somewhere where she didn't have to worry about pizza and beer smooshed into the seats. Nancy had long since left her for Steve (so much for a "girls' night") and Ally was growing increasingly tiresome with her endless flirting and drinking. She was totally wasted, and the only reason she was still around Randy at all was simply because she refused to dance until "the right one asked".

At that point, Randy was quite sure that *anyone* would be the right one.

"Hey, I'm just going to run to the bathroom real quick," she said.

Ally was too far gone to really care.

"Mmkay," she slurred, giving Randy a slow grin. "Have fun."

"Um, sure..."

Randy pushed her way through the endless sea of sweaty bodies until she reached the staircase. She brushed past couples and crying girls as she climbed, hoping for a moment of peace in the bathroom.

The door was unlocked and no one answered when she knocked, so she swung it open.

She froze.

"Nancy?" she asked.

Nancy was leaning against the counter, once white sweater now soaked through with blood-red punch. She was crying and trying to wipe the stain from her shirt. The stench of alcohol and fruit rolled off her in waves. The flush of her cheeks and dazed look her in eye was a clear sign she had *way* too much to drink.

Randy glanced behind her before moving inside and closing the door.

"Here," she said, taking the towel from Nancy's hands. "I don't think you're going to get it out. It's pretty stained."

Nancy looked down at the sink, lower lip jutted.

"You okay?" Randy asked, even though the answer was as quite obvious.

"Steve's mad at me," Nancy mumbled.

Randy set the towel on the sink and turned on the water.

"What happened?" she asked, dipping the cloth beneath the faucet.

"I told him our-our relationship is bullshit," she slurred, rocking forward. "I told him that he is- that he is bullshit."

Ouch.

"Oh, Nance," she chided. "You didn't mean it, though. Right?"

Nancy didn't look up.

Randy took the wet towel and tried her best to wipe the red from Nancy's sweater, but after a time of scrubbing, she gave up.

"Everything is bullshit," Nancy mumbled.

Randy hung the towel back on its rack.

"You don't mean that," she said.

"Yeah."

"But you love Steve. And He loves you."

"It doesn't matter!" Nancy burst. "It doesn't matter because-because everything is *bullshit*. Barb is gone, and it's my-my fault and St-Steve is acting like no-thing is wrooong."

Randy leaned against the counter, arms crossed.

"You know that's not true, Nance," she said. "Steve loves you, and the only reason he isn't acting like something is wrong is because there isn't anything anyone can do. The State police are looking for Barb, the Hawkins police are looking for Barb, and someone *will* find her. Steve's just trying to keep your mind off it, is all."

But Nancy's swollen eyes grew moist again and she took a stuffy inhale.

"It's just..." She cut off. "It's all just bullshit."

She took a tug on her wet sweater again. Then, wordlessly, she turned and opened the door.

Slam.

Randy stood in the silence of the bathroom, staring at the floor.

Well, if nothing else, she was going to hear about this from Steve. And it wasn't going to be pleasant.

Groaning, she lifted her hands and rubbed her face.

She was really, *really* ready to go home.

At that point, though, it wasn't an unrealistic option. Steve was probably off sulking, and Nancy was totally intoxicated, so the odds of both of them being ready to leave (or more so in Steve's case – they would probably have to carry Nancy's unconscious body) were pretty high. Hopefully she wouldn't have to persuade them too much.

Opening the door, she stepped out into the hall and turned to make her way towards the staircase. Walking blindly, she missed the person hovering in her way and ran face first into them.

"Sorry, I-"

She broke off.

Tommy grinned down at her.

10. The Halloween Party, Part 2

Billy was uncharacteristically tired of partying, and it wasn't even midnight.

Leaning against the wall of the living room, he took a long drag on his cigarette and watched the half-dressed girls and overambitious guys romp around in their alcohol-induced craze that may or may not have been a form of dancing. At this point, at least half the party was wasted, so any type of action had gone from semi-normal teenage stupidity to absolutely wasted shit.

For Billy, who could hold his alcohol very well, the scene was pitiful. Even the party-hard jocks were plastered, and most had only downed three or four beers. Not that he was immune to the keg that he had chugged – he could feel the buzz deep in his skull; his vision was off and his thoughts were a little contorted, but he was so used to the feeling that ignoring it was second nature.

They didn't call him Keg King for nothing.

Still, he hated the laughing, the stumbling, the stupid behavior that followed the scent of body odor and alcohol. It was barely midnight on Halloween, and already half the people there could barely remember their own names. Even Tina was laying somewhere past out, which had put a damper on Billy's after-party plans. And without her on his arm, he'd become easy bait for Carol, who had tried to pull a few moves on him. Admittedly, he had let things go a little further with her than he had originally intended. Mostly it had been a tease — he wanted to spark some heat, then leave her hanging just for the hell of it. And it had worked well enough, but now there was no Tina and no Carol. And with Michael and Ryan off somewhere with their own conquests, there really wasn't much else to occupy him.

Letting his cigarette rest between his lips, he watched the chaos unfold around him numbly. A few times Harrington past through his line of sight, disappearing into the crowd of dancers and reappearing on the other side of the house. Wheeler had long since vanished, probably puking in the bathroom or trying to find a ride home, so whatever it was that Harrington was looking for Billy didn't know

and didn't care.

If he didn't hate his dad so much, he might have considered going home. But home wasn't really home at this point in his life; he had a roof over his head and food when he was there, and it was a place to crash when he was sick of driving around, but he had no emotional attachment to it, or the people in it. Especially not his dad.

The thought made his stomach twist. He was supposed to have been home by eleven, and it was now going on twelve. He was very, very late. And his dad hated when he was late.

Billy pulled his cigarette from his mouth, exhaled. He noticed that Harrington had stopped his frantic searching and was now staring at the ceiling with his hands on his hips. He licked his lips and mumbled something to himself, and Billy took another draw, blew it into the space in front of him, clouding Harrington.

Billy snorted to himself.

Asshat, he thought mockingly, taking another deep inhale. *Just go home already.*

When the smoke dissipated, Harrington was no longer staring at the ceiling. He was scanning the room in what looked like a last-ditch effort to find whatever it was he was looking for, and when his gaze came to rest on Billy, he froze. Their eyes locked.

For one steely moment, Billy thought he was finally going to get the fight he'd been craving since the first moment he stepped into Hawkins High. There was a frigid distaste that passed between them, and Harrington stiffened as Billy pinched his cigarette and pulled it from his mouth. But the moment was over before Billy could even digest the change, and Harrington was suddenly looking at him like he had just found the answer to a very, very big problem.

And Billy didn't like that at all.

Without warning, Harrington lunged. Billy, startled, dropped his cigarette, but before he could even get his fists up, Harrington had grabbed hold of both his shoulders and was holding him at arms

length with a grip of steel.

A fist Billy had expected, but this? This sudden helplessness that was radiating off Harrington? No. No, he hadn't expected this at all.

"Have you lost your fucking *mind*, Harrington?" Billy snapped, trying to shove his hands away.

But Harrington ignored him.

"You live next to Randy, right?" he demanded. When Billy simply stared, he gave him a shake. "*Do you live next to Randy?*"

"Wha— *who?*"

"Randy!" Harrington pressed, shaking Billy more violently. "Nancy's friend!"

"*Peters?*" Billy nearly choked.

"Yeah, you two are neighbors, right?" Harrington continued with urgency. "Like, a right-next-door, thing, right? *Right?*"

"Yeah, but what the hell does that—"

"Oh, thank God." Harrington sighed in relief, released Billy who quickly backed away. "I'll leave her to you, then. I gotta head out, but she lives twenty minutes in the opposite direction."

"What the hell does that mean?" Billy demanded.

"Uh, give her ride?" Harrington said as if it was the simplest thing the world, then snorted. "It's not rocket science, Hargrove. You live next door."

"You must have seriously lost your shit," Billy deadpanned.

"Yeah, maybe, but hey, you gotta do what you gotta do. Anyway, I don't know where she is, but I'm sure she won't be too hard to find."

"No way in *hell* am I—"

"Just make sure she gets home in one piece," Harrington called as he

backed away, pointing a finger at him.

"Wait a fu— *Harrington!*"

He disappeared into the crowd of dancers.

Billy ran a hand through his hair.

"The hell," he muttered to himself. "She's not even *here*."

Harrington was definitely losing his mind. Either Wheeler had finally pushed him over the edge or he was completely wasted. Maybe high. Maybe both. Either way, he was gone. Peters had made it very clear that she hated parties. Halloween or not, she was a no-show. And even if she *had* changed her mind, Billy would have known. He would have seen her — heard someone mention her — *something*. He knew everyone that was there, and Randy Peters was *not* one of them.

Billy pulled out a fresh cigarette and brought his lighter up to it.

Flick, flick.

He scowled.

Flick, flick.

Flick, flick, flick.

"Piece of shit," he grumbled, giving it one more good slide of his thumb.

The lighter flared to life.

Billy puffed a few times until the familiar smoke filled his lungs, then exhaled a cloud through his nose. Glancing towards the wide-set staircase where toilet paper and party streamers clung, he reached up to pull the stick from his lips and froze.

How he had not seen her the whole night was completely beyond him, but there Peters was, just like Harrington had said, standing at the top of the steps. But she wasn't alone. Tommy had her cornered,

and if there was anything that he knew about Tommy, it was that anyone cornered by him who wasn't Carol probably didn't have anything good coming their way. Especially not someone like Peters.

Shoving off the wall, he made his way towards the stairs. Whitesnake thrummed in his ears and shreds of toilet paper clung to walls and ceilings around him. The smell of perfume and cologne permeated the air as girls stumbled past him with empty cups and running makeup, too wasted to even notice him.

It wasn't Tommy's bullying that took Billy up the steps. He didn't believe in standing up for people; no one had bothered to do him any favors, so what did he owe anyone else? No, he wasn't going to save Peters — that nice guy stuff was bullshit. He was going to pick a fight. He was bored, he was angry, and he'd missed his chance with Harrington. Tommy was the simplest solution to that problem, and one that would feel damn good to hit.

As he neared the top, taking slow, careful steps, he could hear Tommy's hoarse growl, wooed by alcohol and cigarettes, "C'mon, Peters. You're stuck here. What's anyone gonna do about it?"

Peters was backed against the wall with Tommy holding onto her arm, his face inches away from hers.

"Ugh, do you seriously not having anything better to do but bother me?" she groaned. "You're at a *party*. Go find Carol and make-out in a corner, or something."

Billy stopped at the top landing and leaned against the banister, cigarette hanging from his lips as he watched the interaction.

"Nah," Tommy drawled, leaning in closer with an eerie smile, "This is more fun."

Billy contemplated grabbing the back of Tommy's shirt and heave-hoing him down the staircase, wondering just how funny it would be to watch him roll all the way to the floor.

"Seriously, leave me alone." Peters shoved at Tommy's chest, but Freckles barely budged. "I just want to go home, okay?"

Or maybe he could just tap Tommy on the shoulder, knock him out cold with one good hit, and avoid the effort of a full-on fight?

"Awe, is it past poor Peters' bedtime?" Tommy cooed. His grin turned feral and he slammed his other hand next to her head, trapping her on both sides. "Well, that's just too damn bad, isn't it?"

Billy's patience snapped like an over-stretched bungee cord. He rolled his cigarette around in his mouth, then gave a pointed clear of his throat. Tommy whipped around and Peters glanced at him from beneath an arm.

"The hell do you want, Hargrove?" Tommy demanded coolly.

Billy took his cigarette from his mouth, shrugged, then muttered, "Just came to take a piss, Freckles. Didn't know you were so desperate for someone to screw with that you started threatening girls, though. Pretty sad."

"What's it to you?" Tommy snapped, not releasing Peters. "It's none of your damn business what I do to nerds."

"I came to take a piss and you're in my way, so—" Billy gestured to them, "Yeah, it kinda looks like it's my business."

"Fuck yourself, Hargrove."

Billy's mouth twitched and he bit down on his cigarette.

"Careful, sweetheart," he murmured around the smoke. "Don't want you getting hurt now, do we?"

Tommy released Peters and strode up to Billy, straightening to his full height and meeting Billy's gaze.

"You asking for shit, Hargrove?"

"Asking for you to get the hell out of my way," Billy said quietly, dangerously.

"Too damn bad," Tommy spat.

"Then I'm going to ask for shit."

Tommy grinned, the action crude and sharp. "I've been itching for a fight with you, Hargrove."

Billy took a draw from his cigarette. He released the smoke in Tommy's face.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Tommy said. "And I can't wait for this ugly bitch to wipe your blood off the floor when I'm done."

Billy snorted. He threw the butt of his cigarette down and stomped on it as he took another step forward until he was nose-to-nose with Tommy.

"Let's get this over with, Freckles. I gotta piss."

Tommy clenched his jaw. His arms shook and his face twitched, and for a moment, Billy thought he was really going to take the opportunity to swing. But there was conflict in his gaze, an inner battle bubbling beneath the rage.

"Well?" Billy murmured. "What are you waiting for, pretty boy?"

Sweat mingled with his freckles, mouth working, brows quivering with rage.

Billy smirked. "No?"

Tommy swallowed, raised his chin.

"Well then, maybe it would be better if you just—" he pushed Tommy away with the tips of his fingers, "—walked away."

Tommy wanted it; he wanted it so bad, and so did Billy, just so he could kick his ass and make him look like a fool in front of everyone. But unfortunately for him, Tommy was brighter than he looked. Billy had at least five inches on him, and in terms of muscle, Freckles was undeniably lacking. If they fought, he would lose. And they both knew it.

Licking his lips, Tommy glanced back at Peters. She was watching them, arms crossed, expression unreadable, and for a moment Billy was actually worried that Tommy might pull something incredibly cowardly and incredibly stupid. But after piercing her a look of withering contempt the moment passed, and luckily for the both of them, he did nothing else.

"Have fun fucking the nerd, Hargrove," he hissed, shoving his shoulder into Billy's as he walked past.

Billy was tempted to kick him down the stairs, to watch him roll like a stupid sack of potatoes, but the fight in California, his dad's fury, and the sudden move to Hawkins flashed through his mind, and he clenched his fists instead. Chewing on his cigarette, he took a deep breath in, then a deep breath out, then a deep breath in, then a deep breath out. Once he was fully in control of himself, he tore his gaze from his boots, caught Peters' eye. He glowered at her.

"The hell you looking at?" he snapped.

She rose her hands in a mock of surrender.

"I was just going to say thank you."

"*Thank you?* Do you know how many times I've saved your sorry ass?" He held up two fingers. "Twice, dipshit. *Twice.*"

"Yeah, well, I didn't *ask* for your help. I had everything under control."

"Under control?" Billy barked a laugh. "That's what you call 'under control'?"

"Yes."

"No, that's called being a *moron*, you dipshit. That's called pushing the biggest dick in school to almost ruining you're fucking *life* by making you do things you can't even imagine. That's not *under control*, that's —" He inhaled, wiped a hand down his face. "You know what? I'm too tired for this bullshit—"

Billy broke off. Peters' eyes were moist and red, her lip quivering.

He sighed.

"Whatever," he grunted, digging into his pocket and pulling out his car keys. He tossed them to her.

"Wait in the car," he snapped, shoving past her and towards the bathroom. "I'll be out in five."

He was so going to kill Harrington.

11. It's in the Trees

Randy stared out the window as they drove.

She tried so hard to blend in with the passenger seat; tried so hard to be invisible; tried so hard to disappear – she even held her breath a few times, worried that Hargrove might hear her breathing or see it fogging the window, then suddenly realize that she was in his car. She hoped that the longer they stayed quiet, the less likely he would be to snap at her or ask questions. Not because she was scared of him, but because she was ashamed of herself. And she really didn't want to talk about it.

But even though the majority of the ride was spent in a tense hush, Randy could tell by the lack of radio and the stiffness of his posture in the window's reflection that he was absolutely going to talk. Probably chew her out for ruining his night.

She sunk down into her seat.

The movement must have caught his attention, because she could see from the streelight's glow on the window that he had glanced at her.

"As much as I like being a hero," he began around his cigarette, tone stern, "let's not repeat shit like this, got it?"

She wasn't sure if he meant the ride or Tommy, but decided it was probably safe to assume both.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Okay."

Hargrove toyed with the cigarette in his mouth.

"As for rides," he continued, smoke billowing from his nose, "they're only on weekdays. I said I'd drive you to and from school. I never agreed to play your chauffeur at parties."

The thought was laughable. She didn't, obviously, but imagining him dressed in a suit and tie with a nice little cap, opening his Camaro door for her with a bow, was painfully funny.

"Don't worry about that," she promised.

She had no plans on going to a party again. Ever.

Hargrove glanced at her, his reflection blurry but the action unmistakable.

"Why'd you come?" he asked.

"Nancy," she answered simply. "She wanted me to go. So did Ally."

"And what the hell are you even supposed to be? You do realize it was a Halloween party, right? And you're a what? Crazy cat lady?"

Randy lifted her nose. "I wouldn't expect a degenerate like you to know."

"Careful, princess," he warned, "I can still make you walk."

Randy contemplated this.

"And don't pretend like you don't care!" he snapped.

She lifted her shoulder. "Not a horrible option. But if you must know, I'm Samantha from Sixteen Candles."

Hargrove snorted. "The hell is that?"

"A movie."

"Not one I've ever seen."

"It's a romantic comedy. And it has boobs. You'd probably like it."

His eyebrows shot up.

"Well," he murmured, lifting his cigarette to his mouth. "Remind me to watch it."

"Pervert."

"But seriously, why would you dress up as some chic from a rom-com on Halloween night?"

"What would you rather have me go as?" she asked. "A playboy bunny?"

Now he was really grinning.

"Not a bad idea," he said roguishly. "A one piece, some fishnets, a little cotton tail—"

Randy gagged. "Please, you're blinding my imagination."

"You might have enjoyed the party more," he pointed out. "Men love that shit."

"You mean *mindless dogs* love it," she corrected. "And anyway, I didn't pick it out. It's Nancy's."

They passed beneath another streetlight, and Randy, something catching her eye, leaned towards the window. Outside, hovering in the outskirts of the trees and just barely visible, was a hulking shadow.

Her mouth fell open.

Was that—?

"Aren't you gonna ask what I am?" Hargrove asked with obvious arrogance.

Randy blinked and the shadow was gone, replaced instead by Willard's Gas Station and an array of parking lot lights.

Maybe she was seeing things?

She pulled back and peeked at Hargrove's costume, realizing she hadn't even looked at it until then. It wasn't really necessary, though — she would have been able to guess even without looking. With his level of self-pride, he *would* have chosen it.

"It's not hard to tell, Fabio," she said loftily. "The Outsiders love showing off their torsos, too."

He actually looked impressed.

"Well, well," he murmured with obvious interest. "Peters knows her stuff."

"I'm kind of a movie buff," she responded.

They fell into silence, and Randy redirected her concentration to the window.

She couldn't shake the feeling she had seen something, just then. Just like that one night, when it came out of the woods. But there were plenty of shadows up and down the street, and Hargrove was going too fast to tell, anyway. It was probably nothing, just her paranoia getting the better of her.

"So." The word broke through the silence like a knife, and Randy had a feeling she wasn't going to like what came next. "How long's it been going on?"

Well, she wasn't wrong. She didn't need him to clarify what "it" was to know what he was asking — it was pretty hard to ignore the glaring fact that someone was bullied.

She leaned back in her seat and kept her eyes glued on the window.

"I don't know," she said, feigning aloofness. "Sometime last year, I guess. Since Nancy started dating Steve."

"Why?"

Randy played with her hands. She figured Tommy was angry at Steve for having ditched him, and because he couldn't take it out on Nancy (and obviously no longer on Barbara, who had been his victim before her disappearance) he had instead targeted her. How true that was, she couldn't say.

"Who knows," she finally sighed. "He's shallow. And a jerk. He probably just wants someone to mess with, and I guess I'm a pretty good target."

Hargrove exhaled a cloud of smoke that filled the car.

"You're a terrible liar, you know that?" he muttered over the stick.

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I don't like to talk about it. It's a touchy topic."

He hummed. "I find punching touchy topics to be most effective."

"Are you suggesting that I punch Tommy?" she asked, eyebrows shooting in interest.

"It'd be funny as hell."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then, picking an invisible fuzzy off her coat, murmured, "I did smash his fingers in my locker door once."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah... He spent the rest of the day in the nurse's." She started to laugh, recalling his sulking expression with his swollen, bandaged fingers held against his chest. "He had to have his hand bandaged for a whole week. It was so pitiful."

Hargrove barked out a sharp laugh.

"Ah, shit," he said, shaking his head. "Wish I coulda saw that."

"Yeah, he deserved it."

Something flashed in the corner of her eye. She turned to the window, but once again, there were only dark trees. This time, however, a heavy fog had descended over the street.

"Shit," Hargrove muttered, leaning forward. "I can't see a damn thing. What's with this fog?"

An unsettling chill wrapped its arms around Randy. She remembered it from the night she had walked home – the night the creature had charged at her from across the road.

Suddenly, the car's radio began to go nuts. The dashboard lights brightened and then dimmed and the crackling voices of the stations began to rush together in a flood of static and broken syllables. The volume went up and down, like someone was spinning the dial

erratically, but neither her nor Hargrove were anywhere near it. The headlights were flickering on and off, just the streetlight had that night.

Hargrove looked down at the dash in confusion, brows scrunched and mouth dropping open.

"What the—?"

"BILLY!" Randy screamed, pointing to the middle of the road.

Hargrove looked up in time to see the four-legged creature in the middle of the road, its face open, teeth glinting in the sporadic headlights.

"Fuck—"

He slammed on the brakes, spun the wheel, and swerved into the other lane. Randy gripped the dashboard as her body lurched to the left, head mere inches from smacking into the window as the force threw them violently around in their seats. The tires squealed and Randy's bag spilled at her feet, but they narrowly missed a head-on collision with the beast, something that seemed like a terrible idea when it was facing you with that mouth full of not-so-pearly whites.

When they were safely past it, Billy straightened out the car and pulled back into the safety of the right lane. The radio fell silent, the dashboard lights retained a healthy glow, and the headlights beamed normal once more.

Both of them collapsed into their seats, breathing as if they had just run a mile. Slowly, they looked at each other.

"Was that...?" he trailed, cigarette barely sticking to his lips.

"Yeah," she replied hoarsely. "That was it."

He had a white-knuckled grip on the wheel, face pale, and he suddenly looked like he was going to vomit.

"Alright," he whispered. "That's... that's not normal. That's *really* not—"

WHAM.

The car lurched to the side, and Hargrove barely managed to stop them from crashing into a tree as he frantically spun back onto the road.

Randy looked out the window. The creature looked back.

She screamed and clambered out of her seat and over to Hargrove, who started to yell with her when the car lurched off the road again as the creature rammed its body into the passenger's door.

"WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?" he bellowed.

A gurgling growl made Randy's skin crawl, eliciting another scream from both her and Hargrove.

"DO. ." she yelled, slamming her fist against his shoulder with every syllable.

Another body slam into her door and the car lurched to the right, but this time, Hargrove couldn't control it. The world turned into a merry-go-round, the headlights like sunbeams and the trees like inky wisps of paint. But luckily for them and the car, the trees had stopped and a small clearing had opened. The Camaro rushed down the divot and into the grass. Randy clung to Hargrove's arm, Hargrove clung to the wheel. They spun into chaos.

"Hold on!" he bellowed suddenly.

He turned the wheel sharply and kicked the car into reverse. The tires spun. The engine screamed. The world stopped spinning and the car shot backwards and back towards the road. Mud spattered the windows, forcing Hargrove to flick on the windshield wipers, smearing grass and liquid brown across the glass. The tires hit asphalt, squealing like small animals, and Hargrove promptly slammed the car into drive again, throttling the vehicle forward and down the street.

"Is it still there?" Hargrove demanded, looking terribly stressed as he peered in every mirror possible.

Randy released him and clambered back over to her seat. She craned her neck to see behind the car, and pressed her face against her window to see if the thing was following them.

"No," she declared, pulling back. "I think it's gone."

They settled back down, and Hargrove began to frantically puff away on his cigarette, while Randy stared dead ahead, feeling like she might be sick.

"Well," she began edgily, forcing a smile, "that was—"

Suddenly, the headlights illuminated something again—

And it was coming right at them.

"Shitshitshitshitshit!" Hargrove cursed, veering to the left.

The creature followed, rearing up on its hind legs. Its face split open, it roared something horrible, and then it threw itself at Hargrove's side.

The car spun.

Hargrove let out a torrent of cusses while Randy screamed and clung to the dashboard. The world went topsy turvy before Hargrove managed gain control of the car, and by the time they were straightened and shooting forward again, they were both sweating and panting and very, very frustrated.

"This *always* happens!" he yelled, extenuating his words with a slam on the wheel. "Every time I'm around you, shit goes down! *Every. Damn. Time.*"

Randy sputtered. "*What?* You think this is *my* fault?"

"Well it didn't start happening until I met *you*!"

"Well it didn't start happening until *you*, either!"

They were flooring it now, going much faster than Randy recalled him going the night they had first encountered the monster.

"I don't get it!" he barked. "What the hell is it?"

"How should I know?" she retorted.

"Uh, because you *live* here?"

"Yeah, but *those* don't! You're from California — *you* should know what an alien is when you see it!"

"Area 51 is in New Mexico, dipshit!"

"And *I'm* the geek?"

They drove for some time in silence, both too shaken to say much else lest it be screaming nonsense back and forth.

Hargrove clearly felt the need to use her as a scapegoat, but no matter how one looked at it, there was no proper explanation. Because for as long as Randy had lived in Hawkins (which had been her whole life, darn it), she had never seen or encountered anything like they just did. Ever. And oh, lord, she prayed she would *never again*.

What felt like an eternity later, the Camaro finally pulled into Hargrove's driveway. The clock read 1:31am, but Randy was quite sure it was closer to 5 or 6. The drive had been so long and so arduous, there was just no way it had only been a half hour.

There was an obvious trepidation to both of their movements as they reached for their doors. Neither one felt like getting out of the car. Knowing something was outside – *really* knowing, this time – was disconcerting, and being out in the dark didn't feel right. But after a minute or so of fumbling with the levers, glancing every so often at each other, it was obvious they couldn't delay getting out for much longer without it just being weird. So, on a silent count of three, they threw their doors open.

Randy knew before Hargrove even fully emerged that he was going to check the condition of his Camaro. And she had a feeling he wasn't going to like it.

Running his hand along the muddy side, his jaw worked overtime. He

clenched and unclenched his teeth, his face twitched, and his eyes narrowed as he assessed every inch of the vehicle. From what Randy could tell, most of the damage was mud. She didn't see any nicks or dings, scratches or dents, which was pretty unbelievable considering the strain it went through with the creature tossing its weight against it.

"Aw, shit," he grumbled, bending down.

He ran his finger over a pretty good sized dent on Randy's door, and she could tell by the look on his face that things weren't going to end well.

"Considering what happened, the paint held up good," she offered helplessly. "I mean, it's a small dent – barely there. No one will notice. Right?"

"I notice," he ground out.

"I mean, otherwise, it just needs a good bath," she continued, pretending not to notice the slow, steely gaze turning on her. "Not-" she slapped her hand on top of the car, "a-" she slapped it again, "problem."

CLUNK.

They stared down at the passenger mirror, which was now laying on the ground by Randy's feet.

Hargrove's shoulders tensed.

"Well..." Randy began quietly.

His hands balled into fists.

"I guess I'll just..."

He rose from his crouched position.

"Get going..."

Without another word, she took off towards her front door, threw it

open, and ran inside.

She didn't miss the bellowed "*PETERS*" that came from behind her, and was pretty sure the neighbors didn't, either.

12. The Lead

Randy felt bad about the car, she really did.

Even though she had managed to hose off the mud before they left for school the next morning, Hargrove's usually sleek Camaro was still lacking its luster. And, oddly enough, so was Hargrove himself. She figured the car was just in need of a good wax, and the dent in the door could be pulled out with a little bit of elbow grease and a decent plunger. The mirror... Well, the mirror was a different story. It would take a good mechanic and probably a good dose of money to fix that mess. And Hargrove, as much as she hated to admit it, was making her feel awful about it. Not because of his grumpy attitude towards her or his sulking — those were normal, really — but because of his genuinely dejected expression whenever he looked at the car. It was like someone had just taken a childhood toy, one with great memories, and smashed it to pieces. Clearly he had a strange attachment to the thing, and seeing it in such a banged up condition was bothering him in more ways than his bad mood let on.

She *had* apologized. Truly. Even after he watched her hose off the entire vehicle in thirty degree, nippy morning air, leaning against his front porch with a stupid cigarette hanging out of his mouth and a bowl of Smurf-Berry Crunch while she froze and risked frostbite, she didn't get annoyed. She was sincerely apologetic about the whole business (even though it wasn't really her fault to begin with) and was putting in genuine effort to fix it. Unfortunately for her, it was going to take a lot more than a hose-down, plunger fix, and apology to pacify Hargrove's temper.

Pulling her locker open, Randy stuck her head inside and leaned it against her books.

"Why does life have to be so complicated?" she muttered to herself, voice echoing against the metal walls.

"Andy, are you okay?"

Popping back out of the cramped space, Randy tried to look casual as Nancy peered at her from over her stack of books. Jonathan stood a

short distance behind her, pretending to look interested in the sleeve of his coat.

"I'm fine," Randy lied smoothly, as if she hadn't just hid inside a locker. "How are you feeling?"

It wasn't necessarily meant to be a dig about the party – Randy wouldn't stoop that low with Nancy. Her friend's welfare *was* important to her, even though *hers* obviously meant little to said friend, who had become so intoxicated that she had left her non-intoxicated friend completely stranded at a party she hadn't even wanted to go to in the first place, only for her friend (Randy) to get stuck riding home with the resident bully and possibly dangerous school bad boy, Billy Hargrove, who nearly got them eaten by some unknown road-rage-monster-creature. Not to mention that said friend (Nancy) had broken up with her long-time boyfriend (Steve) who, incidentally, had just made a math-homework pact with Randy, and would be very, *very* angry about that pact not becoming what he hoped it would be, meaning life was going to be hell for a long, long time.

...Right. Well, maybe the question *had* been a dig.

"I'm *really* sorry," Nancy said, shoulders stooping and face stretched in a grimace. "I know what I did was... *totally* stupid, and I know you paid for it–"

"And Steve," Randy added, slamming her locker closed.

"Listen, I know I was total bitch. I shouldn't have done that. I was... upset, and I made a mistake, and I'm *sorry*." She hugged her books to her chest. "*Please*, Andy. I know you're mad, but I can't lose someone else because of another stupid mistake that I made. Please. I can't lose you, too."

Randy glanced at her. Nancy's eyes were glazed, and guilt was practically radiating from every inch of her. She didn't have to say the name of the first friend that she lost because of a stupid mistake. They both knew.

Barb.

Randy broke.

"Fiiiine. But *no. More. Parties.*" She pointed at Nancy. "I don't care how much you want me to go, I won't."

Nancy's face crumbled in relief.

"Thank you," she breathed.

"Whatever. You weren't the one who got stuck riding home with Fabio, here." Randy jerked her thumb in the direction of Hargrove, who was making out with Tina against some poor freshman's locker.

"Yeah... about that..." They made their way down the hall, Jonathan trailing some ways behind. "I'm sorry Steve left you. He shouldn't have."

"I survived," Randy replied casually. "Somehow. Though you might want to talk to him. He was really upset."

Nancy fell silent, and Randy, suspicious, paused in her steps. Nancy did not, and Randy watched her walk away, head dipped down.

"Nance?" she called after her.

"She talked to him," Jonathan said from beside her. Randy glanced at him. "It didn't go so well."

Jonathan Byers wasn't Randy's favorite person on the planet. It wasn't because he had deliberately done something wrong, or even because he had given her a legitimate reason to think ill of him; the guy was nice enough, albeit eerily quiet for a high schooler, and he treated Nancy well (minus the creepy stalker incident the year before). But there was something off about him. Something Randy couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Yeah?" she asked. "What happened?"

She wasn't stupid. It was obvious. But it was a wonder that Jonathan Byers knew before she did.

Jonathan only shrugged his shoulders.

"She wouldn't really say. All I know is that they broke up." He paused. "Well, legitimately."

Curiouser and curiouser.

Something was going on between Jonathan and Nancy, and it was something that Randy was going to discover sooner rather than later. She was sick of being kept in the dark all the time. Barb at least had good incite on Nancy's "extra-curricular" activities, but now with her gone, Nancy kept her lips sealed.

And Randy was going to loosen them.

Lifting her watch, she sighed.

She had decided to skip lunch so she could go to the library, but Mrs. Simmons's questioning as to why she would let Steve Harrington copy off her math homework and then *lose* it had taken a lot longer to explain than she had hoped. There was the usual "I was just trying to help his grades" and "I promise I won't let it happen again" fluffy talk, even though the whole shebang had been a lie to cover up Tommy's jerk prank. If nothing else, she couldn't be mad at Steve for ditching her because, thanks to him, she had taken credit for the homework simply because Mrs. Simmons trusted her.

Still, she hated lying to teachers.

"I deserve to go to jail," she whined to herself, halfway to the library doors.

Suddenly, her arm was snagged.

Randy didn't put up a fight as she was dragged into the closet she had been walking past. Sadly enough, it wasn't so much the sudden kidnapping that scared her – it was the fact that it was a *déjà vu*.

Kidnapping shouldn't be a *déjà vu*.

What was even more sad was that she knew exactly who it was in the closet with her, even though she couldn't see him.

"Harrington, you're really starting to freak me out."

"It's the only private place we can talk," he said defensively.

With a *click*, his face lit up with the ghostly glow of a flashlight. His expression was one of extreme disappointment, and she tilted her head at him, making a face of disgust.

"You *really* have to stop doing this. It's totally creepy."

"Like I said, Peters: only private place to talk."

"I can think of a few good places that don't involve small, dark spaces."

"Oh yeah? Like what – an empty classroom? Behind the school? *The girl's bathroom?*" He gave her a 'c'mon, Randy' look. "Because people *definitely* won't think we're canoodling in any of those places."

Unfortunately, he had a point.

"Right. Well, not that I mind the creepy closet and flashlight atmosphere, but... why, exactly are we here?"

"*Why?*" he repeated, as if the answer was obvious. "Uh, because you lied to me?"

"Oh no," Randy murmured, immediately anxious. "You found out about the 5th grade science fair."

"Yes, I di– wait, what?"

"Oh. Never mind."

"No, what about the 5th grade science fair?" he demanded.

"It's nothing," she insisted, waving her hand. "Super unimportant. What were you going to say?"

His mouth dropped open, and he pointed at her.

"You were the one that put that toothbrush in my blender!"

"What?" she asked, snorting. "Nooo. No. That wasn't me. I don't even know what you're talking about, to be honest."

"I saw you walk past my table – I *saw* that look on your face!"

"I– okay, yeah. That was me," she admitted. "But I just wanted to know if it could chop it up – I was just curious."

"It *blew up*! I *failed* the science fair!"

"Yeah, but I gave you my First Place ribbon, remember?" she pointed out. "You were crying under the table, and I handed it to you."

Steve inhaled, dropping his arms.

"Yeah, I guess..." he grumbled. "But you still ruined my project."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay..."

They stood in silence for a minute or so.

Steve suddenly swore.

"Shit – now you've got me all sidetracked. I meant you *lied* to me about *Nancy*!"

"I never lied to you," she argued.

"Uh, yeah you did." He laughed, the sound humorless. "I mean, you told me that it was okay to press things with Nancy. That I was in the clear. Remember?"

"No."

"Well, you did."

"Actually, I never told you anything."

"Exactly! That's basically the same thing as giving me the go-ahead."

"Are you dumb or just stupid?"

"Maybe you want to rephrase that."

"No, I think I was perfectly clear. Because I *never* told you to go ahead — I simply said I would talk to her."

"In dude lingo, that's exactly what you said, Randy."

"I didn't know I had to carry around a dictionary just to make sure you didn't make a fool of yourself."

Steve lifted his hands in exasperation.

"You know what? I don't have time for this shit." He shook his head, turning around. "I needed your help and you dropped the ball, and now Nancy and I are history and the whole freaking school knows."

"Hold on," Randy countered, "how is it *my* fault that you and Nancy broke up? Because I remember quite vividly that you were the one that made her angry enough to get herself wasted on punch, then preceded to *ditch* her. *And* me, for that matter!"

Steve let his head loll back and groaned.

"Uh huh," Randy concluded. "That's what I thought."

"You know what, I seriously have no *idea* what I did to piss her off so much!" Steve burst. "She just started yelling at me in the bathroom and telling me that everything is bullshit and that – oh, yeah – our whole relationship is bullshit, and–."

Randy snatched the flashlight from his grasp and shined the beam in his eyes. He lurched back and threw his hands over his face, yelping.

"Okay, okay!" he exclaimed, waving her away. "Geez, I get it. You don't have to blind me."

"You know what you did," Randy said, "so you're the one that's going to have to fix it."

Lowering his hands, Steve gave her a "you've gotta be kidding me look". When she didn't waver, he sighed.

"But I don't know *how* to." He ran a hand through his hair, messing the already unnaturally voluminous locks. "All I know is that it has to

do with Barb. But how the hell am I supposed to fix that? Barb's d--

He suddenly broke off, and Randy stared at him.

"Well, you know," he continued quickly, sounding like a scratching record, "She's missing. There's, you know, nothing I can do about it."

They stood in silence for a moment, Randy surveying him closely.

It certainly didn't *sound* like he was going to say "missing". For a second there, it almost sounded like he was going to say *dead*.

"Anyway," he exhaled, dropping his hand, "Guess it really is my shit to clean up. I just... I just really thought Nancy and I were going to work out. I was even going to wait a year after we graduated; work with my dad, earn some cash, save up for a wedding..."

He broke off, face contorting.

"Shit. How did things get so screwed up?" he muttered.

"Hey, things will work out," Randy said reassuringly. "Just give her time to cool off."

Steve sighed. "Yeah, I guess."

He waited a moment, then turned and opened the door. Light flooded the dark space, and Randy followed him back into the hallway.

Steve opened his mouth to say something to her, but then promptly snapped it shut. He was looking at something behind her, eyes bugged, and she kicked off the flashlight and turned around.

They both froze.

Hargrove was standing at the end of the hall. He was staring at them, mouth hanging open, hands frozen around a basketball.

"Ah, shit," Steve grumbled.

Hargrove said nothing for a moment, looking too surprised to even move. He had clearly just gotten out of gym and was heading to

lunch; his hair was messy and his face red, and she could smell the fresh bout of cologne he had used to cover up the smell of sweat.

He shifted, lowering the basketball as he took in her Steve. Slowly, a cruel grin started to cut across his face, and his tongue flicked out, running along his teeth.

"Well, well," he murmured. "I heard you and Wheeler were over, Harrington, but I never thought you'd get over her so quick. And with her best friend?" He hissed in false pain. "Ouch."

"It's not what it looks like," Steve snapped, cheeks coloring at the accusation.

Hargrove lifted a shoulder, that sharp grin still intact. "Whatever you say."

"You better keep your mouth shut about what you saw, Hargrove," Steve warned, taking a step forward.

"Ooh, got some bite today, huh, Harrington? You look a little worried over a... 'misunderstanding'."

Steve's irritation was already pretty high, and Hargrove was pushing it. Randy exhaled as Steve started to move closer to the instigator, fists clenched and hair bouncing.

"Ladies, ladies," she said soothingly, stepping in front of Steve. "You're both beautiful. How about instead of fighting we go get some lunch? Hm?"

Hargrove only laughed and turned back to head towards the cafeteria.

"Whatever," he called over his shoulder, voice laced with sarcasm. "I'll let you two shitheads suck face some more."

Steve pushed up his sleeves, cussing under his breath, but Randy elbowed him in the ribs.

"Simmer down. He won't say anything."

"You don't know that," Steve growled.

"Trust me. He won't."

"Yeah, well, if he does, I'll kill him. My reputation is in bad enough shape as it is with the whole school knowing that Nancy dumped me – I don't need rumors about us screwing around, too."

Randy decided not to take this as an insult. She was used to it now, anyway – Hargrove acted no different about being seen with her. At this point, if it was a male, she figured they wouldn't want to be caught dead with her, and that was that.

"Right," she muttered, lifting her wrist and peeking at her watch. "Well, you have fun with that. I'll see you later."

She turned to head towards the library.

"Where you going?" Steve asked from behind her.

"Library."

"What about lunch?"

"Homework before food, Steve."

"Randy!"

She lifted a hand but kept walking, and Steve grumbled something about "Nancy" and "unreliable wingwomen".

When Randy finally reached the library, she only had five minutes left of lunch. She had sincerely hoped to have enough time to research, but with only five minutes and no idea where to start, she knew the situation was hopeless.

Huffing, she scanned the shelves of books and the empty desks, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

Where to start...?

Amphibians?

No, no. The thing had been away from water, and it was far too cold for an amphibian to be running around.

Reptile?

But it didn't have any scales, it had skin... like a mammal.

"Darn it," she grumbled, chewing on her nails.

Someone cleared their throat behind her.

Randy spun. Mrs. Gilmore was peering at her from over the rim of her glasses, holding a stack of books and tapping her finger on the spines.

"Can I help you, Miss Peters?" she asked.

Randy opened her mouth to tell her no, that she didn't need help; that she was just looking. And maybe where to find books on strange, animal crossbreeds. But she stopped herself.

"Actually," she said, moving closer to the librarian, "where do you think I could find old records? Like, maybe old newspapers, animal sightings, disappearances... things like that."

Mrs. Gilmore's brows rose: two thin, falsely brown lines that contrasted with her head of shockingly white hair.

"On Hawkins?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Is this school related, Miss Peters?"

"What? Oh— yes, yes, of course. It's uh, for a project. A... history project. I told Mr. Palesby that I'd a report on Hawkins' crime history."

It was a big fat lie, but Randy didn't feel guilty this time. Mrs. Gilmore was like Satan's advocate. She once kicked Randy out of the library for sneezing "too loudly", and then banned Barbara for a whole week because she accidentally dropped her books.

Mrs. Gilmore surveyed her through her glasses, eyes narrowed, and Randy kept her face as impassive as she could manage.

Finally, Mrs. Gilmore relented.

"The public library. They have archives dedicated to historical documents on Hawkins." She shifted the stack in her arms. "You could also try the police department. I'm sure they keep records on disappearances and animal attacks. Whether or not they'll let you read them, I can't say."

Randy flashed her a smile. "Thank you, Ma'am."

As she headed back towards the library doors, she lifted her watch. She had about a minute and a half until lunch was done.

She sighed. Leaving empty-handed was disappointing. She had hoped to find at least *one* book that could help. But if she was being honest with herself, where would she have started? Amphibians? Reptiles? Mutant alien creatures? Geez, if she was going *that* route she might as well have just picked a Dungeons and Dragons manual or a comic book. If nothing else, at least now she had a lead. And that was better than nothing.

13. Barbara

Billy drummed his fingers on the hood of his car as he glared at the middle school.

Where the hell was Max? She was late, again. And she knew how pissed he got when she pulled that kind of shit. He had trained her to meet him at his car after school *on time*, every day. But ever since he started giving Peters rides, Max had gotten it into her head that Billy wouldn't rip her a new one in front of a classmate. It was half true, of course — he didn't need to repeat the California incident — but he was quickly reaching the end of his patience, and Max was going to get it when he saw her. Peters or not.

"How long are we going to have to wait?" Samantha asked, twirling her hair.

Billy exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"She's supposed to be here. She's late," he mumbled, fingers drumming more violently. "I'm gonna kill her."

Today, things were a bit different than usual, though. Aside from Max's lateness (which had become something of a norm, anyway), it wasn't Randy Peters that was occupying the passenger seat of his Camaro. Samantha Thompson had stopped him in the hallway before sixth period and asked if he was busy after school, and of course he told her no — that he was free and very interested. Peters had popped into his head momentarily, but then he had recalled her and Harrington's closet rendezvous and figured the annoying little dipshit could hitch a ride home with her new boyfriend. It was Friday, Billy was entitled to some fun.

Besides, Samantha was something to look at. Peters wasn't. Plain and simple. And at least he knew that with Samantha he was gonna get something good out of his night. With Peters, he just never knew. It could be something entirely normal or it could be something batshit crazy, like some game of Russian Roulette.

"So... your sister coming, or what?"

Lifting his watch, Billy cursed. Max was twenty minutes late and so was Peters, and while he was thankful Peters had decided not to show, he was pissed that Max hadn't. For Peters, it was a weight off his chest. He had simply hoped she would walk out, notice Samantha standing beside him, and turn the opposite direction. So whatever the hell she had decided to do instead saved him some trouble. But Max was *causing* trouble, and he didn't like that. At all.

"Screw it." Flicking his cigarette butt, he pushed off from the car. "Little shit can skate home."

He made his way towards the driver's door, fighting to keep his temper in check.

"And don't call her that," he snapped to Samantha, who looked confused.

"What?" she asked.

"Sister." He opened his door. "She's *not* my sister."

Slamming it shut, he kicked the engine to life, waited for Samantha to close her own, then shot backwards. He could feel her looking uncertainly at him as he cranked the wheel with more aggression than necessary, but slammed the gas and shot forward, anyway, throwing her back into her seat. He just barely missed Peters, who was making her way into the parking lot as he was squealing his way out. She jumped backwards as he rushed past, but he pretended not to see her. In his rearview mirror, though, he watched her lift her arms in disbelief, then disappear as he turned onto the main road.

Doesn't matter, he told himself. *Harrington will give her a ride.*

But as much as he tried to convince himself, he couldn't get her expression out of his head.

Randy couldn't believe that Hargrove had ditched her. After promising to give her rides, he'd gone back on his word and left her at the school, alone, to walk home.

Sure, she'd been twenty minutes late, but it just seemed that after the Halloween incident he wouldn't dare abandon her to roam the

streets. Clearly that thing was still out there, and clearly it was looking for someone to snack on, so leaving her to walk their lonely, heavily wooded streets was like a coldblooded death sentence. It just seemed pure evil. But she supposed her death didn't mean much to him, anyway. He *did* almost hit her.

"Jerk," she muttered to herself.

She had seen Samantha Thompson perched in the passenger's seat. He'd left her there on purpose — not because she was late, but because he had a new girlfriend to fool around with. So while he was going to be busy sucking face with Carol's next biggest rival, she was going to be busy fending off a bloodthirsty monster.

If she died, she was going to haunt him for the rest of his miserable life.

Adjusting her backpack, Randy began the long trek to the library. She had planned on making him stop there, anyway. With something to actually go on, she wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to finally figure out what the monster was — and what it wanted.

She had so many other questions she needed to find answers to, too. Like just how long the thing had been in Hawkins, and if anyone else had seen it aside from her and Hargrove. If it had attacked anyone, killed anyone, and she just hadn't heard about it. If it had been in Hawkins before, had attacked before, or if this was its first run. And most importantly: where it had come from and how to get rid of it.

Finding answers seemed like a long shot, though. A monster in Hawkins was a pretty big deal; she figured that if anyone else *had* seen it then the rest of Hawkins would know by now, whether or not it actually believed the tale.

By the time she reached the library doors, her confidence was nearly depleted. Still, there was no way of telling what she would and wouldn't find if she didn't try.

She pushed the double doors open and made her way towards the front the desk. The librarian glanced up from her cataloging and peered at Randy over the rim of her glasses.

"Yes?" she asked.

Randy fiddled with her bag's straps.

"Uh, yeah, I was wondering I could look at old newspapers for Hawkins? It's, uh, for a school project. On Hawkins. On its history."

"Mhm." She surveyed Randy. "And what years are you looking for, specifically?"

"Well..." Randy trailed, trying to assume what she would need. "Maybe everything you have going back fifty years until recently?"

The librarian looked surprised. "That's a pretty broad range."

"I'm not really sure what I'm going to find, so I'm trying to be thorough," Randy explained, forced a smile. "Sorry for the trouble."

She was surveyed a moment longer before being led over to the archives where all the newspapers were kept. The librarian indicated to the files that followed the year range, then left her alone to research.

Dropping her backup beside a chair, Randy took in the amount of files she was going to have to dig through.

"This is going to take all night..."

She glanced at the time — 4:00. She had an hour before the library closed.

"Guess I better get reading," she muttered, opening the file for the year 1935.

There were only a handful of surviving newspapers, but one of the titles caught her eye: **BEAR ATTACK ON CHESTNUT AVE.** She got excited, but after reading through the article she was disappointed. The bear had attacked a woman walking her dog in broad daylight, and six passerby had positively confirmed that the creature had been a bear.

Scratch 1935 off her list.

She continued onto the next year. Then the next. Then the year after that. She kept scanning and reading until she gave up on the 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s altogether, finding nothing even remotely helpful. 1966 had been promising with two UFO sightings, but in the end both articles concluded that the flying lights had been helicopters, and the witnesses both very drunk.

It was now 4:45 and she still the 70s up until the present year to go through, and she was running out of time.

Reclining in her seat, Randy stretched her arms above her head and groaned. The library was mostly cleared out by now, it was really only her and librarian left in the whole building. Outside, the sun had already made its descent, and daylight was fading fast.

Looked like she was going to be walking home in the dark.

Sighing, she fingered through the newspapers for 1984 out of curiosity. There were endless glaring headlines about Will Beyer's disappearance, mingled in with them were those on Barbara's. She paused on these, pulled them out, and ran her hand over the title. **DAUGHTER OF LOCAL COUPLE GOES MISSING: POLICE TO REACH OUT TO STATE AUTHORITIES.**

Against her will, Randy's eyes clouded over. Even though she never said anything to Nancy, Barb's disappearance had been eating her alive since the day she found out. She may not have been as close with her as Nancy had been, but during those stressful days where Nancy's life revolved around Steve and the endless possibilities of popularity, back during Will Beyer's eerie disappearance, Barb and her had grown close. Steve kept Nancy plenty busy, whether she was with him or not, and Ally had been preoccupied by her recent crush, leaving only her and Barb. It had been nice. Comforting. But that all changed when she vanished.

Where are you, Barb?

The article was emotional, full of fretful quotes by her parents and soothing "we'll find her's" and "she probably just ran away's" by the police. She had even been quoted from when the police had questioned her at the high school.

"Barb's my good friend and I hate not knowing where she is or if she's okay. It's like a heavy weight on my chest that I can't lift; I feel like I can't breathe. It's not fair that she's gone, she never did anything to anyone to deserve this. I just want someone to bring her back safe. We all do."

She had never actually read the article before and was surprised by the lack of findings. She knew that there had been no solid evidence for any of the assumptions, but when she really looked at it, nothing about the incident made any sense.

Barb had never packed a bag, all her clothes, except for the outfit she was wearing, were at her home, and she hadn't brought any money with her, so there was no evidence in her running away intentionally. Nancy hadn't heard any screams that night, had told Barb to go home and had assumed that she had when she went out the next morning and didn't see any trace of her. Steve hadn't noticed anything, Tommy and Carol hadn't, either. No one up or down the street had heard or seen anything. Barb never had any strange encounters with anyone and no stalkers that her parents and Nancy had been aware of. She had simply disappeared, no trace left behind except her car parked on the side of the road.

Towards the end of the article was a quote by one of the police: *"We're investigating the possibility of an animal attack."*

Randy narrowed her eyes at this, confused.

What made them think she had been attacked by an animal? There were no signs of a struggle, no signs of running. If it had been animal, certainly there would be blood, shreds of clothes, *something*.

I thought I saw something when I went back, Nancy had said when they were walking to class one morning. *Something in the woods*.

Like what? A person? A bear? Randy had asked.

No... yes? I don't know. Just... something.

Realization hit her like a freight train. Randy slammed the paper down onto the table, rattling the desk, and flew to her feet.

"Oh my gosh," she whispered. *"Barb."*

14. The Falling Out

The walk home was going to be a long, dark one, and Randy was dreading it. Her success at the library might have fulfilled her original goal and given Barb's story some sustenance, but knowing that there was a possible connection between her and Hargrove's monster run-in and Barb's disappearance was not the least bit settling. If anything, it only confirmed her worst fears. Obviously this creature — whatever it was — knew its way around Hawkins, and obviously it was smart enough to evade public eye. And if it had managed to go unnoticed for a whole year, then there was every chance it would continue to do so unless someone did something about. It had attacked Barb once before and it had attacked her twice, who knew how many more people would vanish before someone finally put an end to it?

With the way things were going, that next person could easily be her. Walking alone in the dark with nothing to protect herself, she was little more than monster bait. It had openly attacked her once and then persistently ravaged Hargrove's car the second time, there was just no way she was going to make it home. No way.

Still, Randy kept walking. Hargrove would have called her crazy for it, and maybe she was, but a small part of her couldn't fight the sensation that being eaten by that *thing* was the least that she deserved. Since realizing Barbara's possible fate, stoppering the flooding guilt was impossible. For a whole year everyone had just assumed she'd run away, or that maybe she'd been kidnapped; not once did someone stop and think that maybe she was never coming home. Even *she* hadn't let the thought cross her mind. But now knowing that there was a perfectly good chance that the beast had gotten Barb, Randy no longer felt secure in her friend's return. There was no solid evidence of Barb's demise, but there was enough of a trail to leave Randy's stomach twisted and sick.

And what of Nancy? What of Barbara's parents? They were still looking for her, still waiting for her to come home. They didn't know that there was a good chance she would never come back; that what was left of her was probably laying cold and alone in the middle of

Hawkins' woods, deteriorating, unrecognizable.

Randy squeezed her eyes closed and took in a shaky breath, goosebumps running up and down her arms.

And you could be next.

She almost turned back around and headed for the library. If the librarian hadn't left yet, maybe she would take pity on Randy's sour situation and give her a ride home. After all, who would let a young girl wander the streets in the dark? No sensible person, surely.

But thank goodness — drastic measures didn't end up being necessary. To her right was a gas station, and a familiar maroon BMW was parked in its lot. Sitting on the fender was both the last person she had expected to see that night and the first person she hoped that she would: Steve.

He was holding a beer can in one hand, the other draped over his knee. He didn't look like he was enjoying himself, though, all sulky and staring off into the distance. The nasty yellow glow of the parking lot lamp made his skin sallow and his eyes shadowed. His hair was as big as ever but like a shriveling plant it was beginning to wilt, strands drooping into his sullen face.

"Hey, Steve," she called out.

He blinked and lowered his can. "Randy? What are you doing here?"

She made her way towards him, overstepping the small hedge that separated the lot from the sidewalk.

"I just got out of the library," she said, motioning behind her. "Just walking home. What are you doing?"

He lifted the can of beer and she "ah'd". He patted the fender beside him and she joined him under the harsh lamp.

"You shouldn't be wandering alone at night," he chided. "Lots of crazy stuff happening out there."

"I know," she replied lightly, and she did — she knew better than

anyone. "That's why I was hoping you could take me home."

He gave a snort. "You're not giving me much of a choice, are you?"

She pretended to think about her answer. Then, "Nope."

An icy breeze carried a gum wrapper past her feet, the lamp gave a shudder and its light flickered. The creaking of the station's metal gate chorused with the nightly peepers, and Randy, now fully aware of what could be lurking in every dark crevice, shivered.

"Maybe we could continue our conversation in the car?" she suggested, eyes darting from Steve to the shadowed trees across from the lot. "It's freezing."

Steve didn't argue, just motioned for her to help herself. They climbed into his BMW, Randy pulling her door closed with a little more vigor than she had originally meant. She couldn't help it, it felt so nice to lock the dark — and whatever was dwelling in it — out, like how a kid buries their head under their sheets. It wasn't exactly a bunker wall, but it felt good all the same.

Steve stuffed the key into the ignition and the car quivered to life. Music slid from the radio, filling the silence, and he eased the car out of the lot and onto the main road. For a good portion of the drive they both remained mute. It wasn't necessarily an uncomfortable sort of hush, but Randy couldn't stop glancing at his tormented profile as she tried to come up with something to say. He was clearly upset, and though she couldn't logically accept the guilt for his and Nancy's breakup, she did feel that, at least in part, she was to blame for the whole ordeal. He *had* asked her to talk to Nancy, after all — they'd made a pact on it. Perhaps if she had really followed through with her promise Steve would have had a little more of a warning about Nancy's not-so pleasant feelings about their relationship, rather than getting the brunt of it from her intoxicated mouth at the Halloween party.

"Hey..." she started awkwardly, uncertainly, "About Nance... I'm really sorry."

Steve grunted. "Gee, thanks. I'll file that one away with the rest of the

condolences."

"I'm serious, Steve. I feel awful. I made a deal with you and I didn't hold my end, and now things are a mess and I feel like it's all my fault."

He didn't look at her, but his profile softened just the slightest.

"It *would* have been nice if you'd done what you said you were going to do." He paused. "But I know how Nancy can be. She's hard to talk to sometimes. Stubborn. Reserved."

Randy cringed and leaned back into her seat. "I think Barb was one of the few people she was actually open with."

It hurt to mention Barb, but it was the truth. Nancy and Barb had been friends since as long as Randy had known them, and all three had grown up together, went to school together, lived in Hawkins since they were in diapers. The two had been inseparable. Now, with Barb gone, the one and only door to Nancy was closed and locked for good.

As the streetlights passed overhead in morphed speckles of yellow and white, Steve sighed. After a minute, he sighed again.

"It just doesn't make any sense!" he burst suddenly, making Randy jump. "We were happy! We were in *love*! We were— shit, I was going to *propose*. And then suddenly our relationship is bullshit? *I'm* bullshit?"

"She was drunk, Steve," Randy tried gently, "People say stupid stuff all the time when they're drunk, stuff they don't mean."

"It wasn't *what* she said," his voice hitched, "it was *how* she said. How she *looked* when she said it. And when I talked to her today—" He broke off, rubbed his mouth aggressively. "You should have seen the way she looked at me, Randy," he continued, tone strangled. "It was like I had been missing something our whole relationship, something that's been between us."

Jonathan Byers flashed momentarily in Randy's mind, and she couldn't help but wonder if they both had.

"I could talk to her," Randy offered, leaning forward to peer at his woeful face. "Maybe she could explain things to me, and I could you patch things over?"

It seemed like a two-faced thing to do of her, helping her friend's ex get back together with her friend. But Steve wasn't a bad guy — he had a big heart underneath all that hair, and she knew he genuinely loved Nancy. Besides, he was one of the few people in school that actually treated her like a human, and she couldn't even blame that niceness on Nancy — long before the two had dated Steve had always been nice to her, even if mostly aloof.

But Steve shook his head, gave another sigh, this one resigned.

"Nah, there's no point," he muttered bitterly. "It's over with now. And I know it's not just me that's at the center of it, Barb's dea—"

He cut himself off, pressed his mouth together, and Randy looked suspiciously at him.

"What about Barb?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just her disappearance, is all. Nancy hasn't handled it too well." He shifted in his seat, cleared his throat. "And anyway, it's not your burden to bear, Randy. I know you've been kinda left alone since the whole thing."

It was kind of him to notice, and somewhat astute. She hadn't said anything to anyone, but she supposed it was more or less obvious if one really did look at it. Nancy had pulled away from just about everyone since Barb vanished, including her. Jonathan Byers was one of the few people she seemed to let her mask down in front of, which really hurt Randy, who always tried to be the best friend that she could be to Nancy.

Looking down at her hands, she shrugged. "Not a big deal."

"Except that it obviously *is*."

She looked up, met his gaze. His left brow was raised, his right flat against his eye in a "you can't lie to me" expression.

"It's been lonely, yes, *but*." She gave him a pointed look. "I've been fine. I *will* be fine. Don't worry about me."

"Too late, Rand."

The rest of the ride was spent in a comfortable silence. Randy was thankful he had been kind enough to give her a ride, even if she *had* more or less cornered him into it. Just watching the dark trees rush by made her skin crawl. When she imagined herself slowly walking past them with nothing but her backpack as a shield, her stomach would give an uncomfortable flip. Still, she did notice the difference in the way Steve's BMW's seat felt against her back and the way Hargrove's Camaro's did. It wasn't anything huge and it wasn't like the BMW's seats *hurt*, but she was so used to the Camaro that Steve's car felt almost foreign to her. Which was very strange and a little disconcerting. She hadn't realized how accustomed to the Camaro she had become over the past few days, but now that she thought of it, Hargrove *had* become something of a constance in her daily life. And she wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that.

Steve pulled into her driveway and put the car into park. The headlights flooded the dark porch, highlighting the weathered paint and antiquated beams, and Randy gathered her bag.

"Hey, if you need a ride home tomorrow just let me know, okay?" Steve said.

"You're twenty minutes away. I'm not gonna make you do that."

"*Let me know*." He meant it. "Got it?"

"Okay, okay," she opened her door, got out. "*Mom*."

"And don't be a shit about it."

She grabbed her bag off her seat and hoisted it. The strap — which had been through so much with her, including a monster attack — gave a sudden *snap* as the threads broke, and the bag went tumbling to the floor of Steve's BMW. The impact of the hit rattled the already delicate zipper, busting it open and shooting papers and notebooks all over the car.

"Dang it!" Randy began to frantically collect the notes, most of which were from her library excursion, and accidentally bashed her head against the hood of the car. Steve, surprised at her reaction, began to help, even though she told him not to worry about it with an uneasy laugh, gathering the papers into a pile. One was still stuck between his seat and the middle console, and he plucked it out, flipped it over to hand to her, then stared.

"Why..." He brought the paper closer to him. "Why do you have notes on Barbara's... disappearance?"

Randy leaned forward to snatch it away, but he pulled back. He glanced up at her and she was surprised at the anxiety in his eyes, the stiffness of his arms.

"It's not- it's nothing," she lied, grabbing at it once more and this time successfully prying it from his hands. "I'm taking notes for a school project, and I wanted to include Barb, is all. I just don't want anyone to forget about her, because you know how high school can be? I mean, I just think she deserves to be included in a history project — she is a part of Hawkins' story."

Steve continued to survey her.

"Yeah, alright," he said finally, though not at all sounding convinced.

"Right. Yeah." She stuffed it into her broken bag, exhaled. "Well, see you tomorrow!"

She gathered the mess into her arms, smiled perhaps too pleasantly, then slammed the door with her foot and made her way to her house. She pretended to dig around for her keys until she heard Steve pull away, then glanced back to make sure his car was gone. When the headlights had vanished down the street and she was safely alone, she dropped her bag in a heap at her feet and threw her back against the door.

"Gosh," she gasped, "Why does he have to be so darn *perceptive*? How on earth am I supposed to explain what I'm doing?"

Flick.

Randy jumped at the sound. It was one of those kinds of noises that was small, almost imperceptible with the nightly ambiance but still distinctly foreign from it, yet she recognized the sound of the Zippo lighter all the same, mostly from her time around Hargrove who smoked liked it was breathing. She didn't have to look too hard to notice the shadowed outline in front of his house — tall, lackadaisically leaning against the porch. A small flame peeped out of the darkness and illuminated the lower half of his face before vanishing with a another *flick*, leaving the dim glow of a cigarette butt.

She sagged against the door.

"So what, you're *spying* on me now?" she demanded of his shadow.

He gave a gravely laugh, pulled his cigarette away so that the glow momentarily vanished from sight.

"Unfortunately for you, I've got more interesting things to do." He swaggered closer to her. "More important girls to charm."

"I hope you know that spying isn't charming. And neither is ditching."

"You were in good hands."

"Seriously? You left me when there's an alien creature roaming the streets!"

He scoffed. "You were fine."

"I could have been *eaten*," she hissed, stomping up to him. "You do realize that, don't you? You promised to give me rides and you backed out!"

"Woah, hold your shit, Peters." His annoyance was palpable, even in the darkness. "I never *promised* anything. I *offered*, you accepted, and that was it. I even had to *threaten* you to get you to do it. I never made a pact to drive you home everyday so you wouldn't become monster meat, I only offered because it seemed like a pretty shitty thing *not* to do after what happened."

Randy pressed her lips together. It was true that he hadn't exactly

promised to give her rides everyday; he never even clarified how often or for how long he would offer them. Still, it felt like he had went back on his word, even if he'd never given it, leaving her on her own like that just so he could have some hands-on time with Samantha Thompson. It was stupid, but she felt like she'd been betrayed.

"Besides," he muttered around his cigarette, "you and Harrington were looking pretty cozy today. I just assumed you had a ride already lined up."

She puffed derisively. "Really? This is about *Steve*?"

"Hey, I was only giving you the option to suck more face. Outside a closet, anyway. Which you two must have been happy about, considering its—" He lifted his watch, squinted it at in the dark, "Almost six."

Even in the shadows she could make out his devilish smirk.

"Really? That's really what you think?" He merely lifted his cigarette to his mouth, teeth glittering in the dim light of a window. "Gosh, you're so stupid. I mean, me and Steve? That's just— Ugh, that's just no. The reason I'm late is because he *didn't* give me a ride after school. I walked to the library after *you* left me behind to get eaten, because I decided 'hey, it might be a good idea to know what this creature is', which you obviously didn't, considering you were getting fresh with Samantha while *I* was doing the boring research. And as I was walking home I just happened to meet Steve on the way, and thankfully, because he's actually a decent human being — unlike *some* people — he decided it wasn't very safe for me to be walking in the dark. Funny, because he doesn't even know there's some no-faced lizard roaming the streets."

But Billy didn't seem to be the least bit moved by her speech. If anything, his lackadaisical attitude only intensified as he responded, "As cruel as I may seem, my intentions were good. Or at least not entirely horrible. But obviously you and Harrington are a little touchy about your new relationship, which—"

Randy threw her hands up and growled in frustration, slicing his

sentence in half. She usually prided herself on self-control when it came to emotions, but tonight she was tired and frustrated, and Billy, in his typical irritating fashion, was only making things worse.

"There is *nothing* going on between Steve and I! Why can't you get that through your fat head?"

"Didn't look that way to me when you two tumbled out of a supply closet."

"He wanted to *talk!* In private! And it wasn't *my* idea to discuss his relationship issues with Nancy in a closet — he dragged me in there. I was just trying to be a good person and *help* by —"

"—by cozying up with him?" he finished for her.

The way he twisted context and words was evil. Just downright evil. Which, at that moment, certainly matched his shady presence, blurring almost perfectly with his dark surroundings like he was King of Hell himself. And while a part of her was tempted to reach out and slap the cigarette out of his mouth, she decided that it probably wouldn't be a good idea, and restrained the urge. But it didn't stop her from pushing him, forcing him back a few inches.

"You're a jerk, you know that?" she hissed. She pushed at him again. "You *ditched* me. And now you're accusing me of screwing around with *Steve*? My best friend's ex boyfriend?" She gave him another a shove and was rather surprised that he allowed her do it, that he didn't gave *her* a good push. "I'm not Carol. I'm not Tina. And I'm *not* Samantha. And I'm so *sick* of you and you're stupid, fake, bad-boy attitude."

"Then I guess you're sick of stupid, fake, bad-boy rides?" he retorted just hotly.

"Yeah, I am." The words were defiant, icy. "And you know what? I don't need you. I would rather walk through those stupid woods with raw meat tied to my head than ride for five minutes in your stupid car."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Then be my guest. You'd be doing us *both* a favor."

He flicked his cigarette towards her and it grazed passed her ear. He turned and stormed back to his house, leaving a steaming Randy to glower at his back.

"Asshole!" she yelled.

If he cared, he didn't show it. His front door closed with a resounding *slam*, and Randy stomped up her own porch steps, shoved the key into the lock, and threw the door open. She tried to close it just as roughly as he had but she imagined what her parents would say to a banged up entryway. She decided not to push her luck and settled for closing it like a normal person. It wasn't at all satisfying, but at the very least she could say that she wasn't acting like him.

As she aggressively kicked off her sneakers and unzipped her coat, the phone rang. She tripped as she tore off her jacket, stumbled over her hastily thrown shoes, and managed to grab the receiver.

"Hello?" she answered.

"*How's our girl doing?*" a familiar voice responded from the other end.

Randy almost the dropped the phone in surprise.

"Dad!"

15. Friends Don't Lie

The next morning, Billy got into his Camaro to leave without Peters, just as they had agreed. She wasn't waiting for him when he went out, and she didn't show after Max opened the passenger door and climbed into the back.

Apparently, she'd meant what she said about not wanting anything to do with him. He was sure that he'd see her wallowing beside his car, begging for forgiveness. But she was just as unpredictable as usual, and as usual, he hated her for it. As much as he didn't want to admit it even to himself, he was both surprised and frustrated that she'd taken the argument so seriously. He *should* have been relieved — she'd finally given him the out that he had been waiting for by removing any sense of obligation that he had in driving her back and forth from school. He had the perfect excuse to extradite her from his life without feeling like a total asshole. No more sneaking around or pretending like he didn't know her, no more worrying about being caught around her or feeling like he had some sort of responsibility for her safety. He'd done his part as a decent human, and now he was finally a free man.

So then why did he feel like total shit?

Everything he knew about himself said that he should be glad. Happy, even. But he wasn't. In fact, he felt more miserable than ever before. And it was irritating.

"Where's Randy?" Max asked from behind him, throwing her backpack into the seat beside her.

"None of your business," he snapped, shifting the car into reverse.

"Is she sick? Did something happen to her?" Max pestered. "Hey, aren't you even going to *ask* her if she's—"

"I said it's none of your damn business, you little shit," he growled, shooting her a withering look.

Max sunk into her seat and pressed her lips together.

Billy rolled out of the driveway more erratically than usual then slammed the car back into drive, but he barely it made four inches from the house before the subject of his problems came tearing up to his window, curly hair messier than usual and her jacket half off her shoulders. She banged on the glass with the palm of her hand, and for a moment, he considered driving away and leaving her to wallow in self-pity. She didn't deserve a ride after the attitude she'd given him — not especially after he'd finally earned his freedom — but that stupid sensation that had tormented him all night and all morning gnawed at his gut more intensely than before, and he rolled down his window.

"Thought we agreed on no more rides, Peters."

She was breathing heavily, face flushed.

"It's not about rides," she said through her breathing. "We need to talk."

Billy surveyed her for a moment.

"About what?" he finally asked.

Her eyes slid to Max in the back seat. "Well..."

"Spit it out. I don't have all day."

She hesitated, chewed on her lip, then, "My parents called last night."

Billy almost snorted. "Congrats."

He began to roll his window back up, but she put her hand on it and continued, "They work at Hawkins lab. I think you might want to hear what they told me."

The his hand froze. He glanced over his shoulder at Max who was watching the two of them with interest, though she dropped her eyes when they met his, and contemplated his options. He *could* get out and listen to Peters ramble about whatever the hell Hawkins lab was; but he *also* could carry on his merry way, pretend she'd never said anything to him. After all, she did clarify that the whole conversation wasn't about rides. He was still obligation-free, though that could

change in a matter of seconds, judging by her tone. But as he scanned her unusually stern expression, he had a feeling that whatever she was on about really *was* something he should know.

"Fine, but you've got two minutes," he barked, pointing at his watch. "Two. Minutes."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever — can you just hurry?" She danced in place like an antsy two year old and moved away from the window.

Billy grumbled as he pushed his door open, stepped down into the frosty grass, and followed her away from the car. When she was certain Max wouldn't overhear, she stopped, and he tapped on his watch to let her know her two minutes were running.

"Alright, long story short: my parents are both scientists at Hawkins lab," she began quickly, "Like, the kind that experiment with chemicals and animals and all that movie nonsense. I don't really know what they do — they won't tell me, they say its 'top secret' — but I *do* know that the government has a hand in all of it, and after what my dad told me last night, I have feeling there's something going on. He's never said anything like that to me before."

"One minutes and twenty-six seconds," he counted down.

"Ugh, okay! So they work a *ton* and are barely every home, and this time going they haven't been here in five days. My parents usually give me a call every so often, just to see how I'm doing, how things are going, but this call was totally unexpected. They weren't supposed to call until Saturday. They didn't say a whole lot, but my dad asked me one thing: if I still walk to and from school."

"One minute and five seconds."

"I told him sometimes I do, sometimes I can get a ride. Why? And he said that he wanted me to ride with someone *everyday*. When I asked why, all he said was that Hawkins was dangerous, and he didn't want me disappearing like Barbara."

Billy momentarily forgot his watch. "Who's Barbara?"

"You didn't hear?" She looked surprised. "Wow, I thought that story

would've been passed around to the new guy like my grandma's spicy tuna casserole. Barbara Holland. She's a friend of mine and Nancy's. She disappeared this time last year, just vanished. No one knows what happened to her. But get this: I was doing some research yesterday, and—"

"Oh, I get it!" he exclaimed, cutting her off and throwing his head back like he'd just made the discovery of a century. "This is your way of trying to justify you needing rides, right? Damn, Peters. You actually had be going there for a second."

He shook his head and began to make his way back to his car.

"What? Wait, no!" She ran after him. "Hargrove, listen, this is *not* about rides!"

"Oh, but your old man conveniently wants you to be driven around because Hawkins is suddenly 'dangerous'? Right. Sounds like some serious bullshit to me."

"Okay, so maybe that came out a little stronger than I meant, but I *swear* this has nothing to do with you driving me around. If you would just *listen*—"

Billy spun around. "No, *you* listen. You told me last night that you were sick of me, so you know what? *Great*. Because of I'm sick of playing this shit game of monsters-in-Hawkins with you. I'm *sick* of it. Go ruin someone else's life. Your two minutes are up."

He went to turn but Peters caught him by his coat sleeve. For a minute, he actually considered giving her a nice, thorough piece of his mind, but when his glower met hers, he felt that strange gnawing sensation in his gut again.

"Listen, I don't care if you make me walk — I get it. What I said last night was awful, blah, blah, blah, and I deserve all this, blah. What I'm *trying* to tell you is that Barbara's disappearance, that *thing*, and Hawkins Lab are all somehow connected. I don't know how or why, but they are. And the only way things are going to back to normal is if we do something about it."

"Oh yeah? And what's that, detective?"

Her grip tightened and her lips pressed into a thin line. "We need to find it. And we need to *kill* it."

Billy's jaw tightened. He knew the creature that had attacked them was far from normal. It was the thing of supernatural stories and alien movies, horror tales fabricated to scare the bejeebies out of campers and kids. Only it wasn't any of those things — it was real. And she wanted to hunt it?

"Kill it?" he echoed. "You want to kill it? And how the hell do we do that? You saw what it did to my car — there's no way we can just 'kill' it."

"I- I don't know," she stammered, looking alarmed. "I guess I didn't think about that..."

It felt stupid going along with such a shit scheme, but if Peters was right — if the *thing* had a connection to a government-run lab and her friend's disappearance — then shit was only just starting to get real. And he was right in the middle of it.

After a moment, he exhaled.

"Alright, get in the car," he ordered.

She stared at him. "What?"

"You heard me."

"No, but this wasn't about a ride—"

"I *know* what it was about," he snapped. "Just get in the damn car."

She had to get her bag from inside, but she obeyed. Max asked her if she was feeling alright, if something had happened, but she just smiled in that enigmatic way of hers and told Max everything was fine, that she was just running late. Billy said nothing, just drove. A part of him was kicking himself for bending so easily to her, but another part was trying to figure out how to kill a monster that could withstand the impact of a car pushing a hundred miles an hour. He

didn't want any part of it, to be honest. Not because he was scared of it (he wasn't — he'd faced plenty of things in his life, and a four-legged animal was the least of those terrors) but because he just wanted his life to go back to normal, and he knew that even if they did manage to kill it, things still wouldn't be the same. Not in Hawkins. Not in California. Not anywhere.

Not ever again.

In Randy's opinion, the whole morning had been a disaster. To begin with, she had never planned on apologizing to Hargrove. Their fight the night before hadn't necessarily been *her* fault. Sure, she had escalated it, but it had been a rough day (also his fault), and he'd gone and needled her to the point of explosion. If anyone deserved an apology, it was certainly her. But just as things always did when he was around, the conversation had gotten out of hand and she'd pulled the only card she knew to get him to listen: apologizing. It had worked well enough, but now her pride was double wounded and he was, once again, getting off scot-free.

In the long run, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that he was aggravating her. Over the last few days she had gotten somewhat attached to his daily presence, regardless of how much of a jerk he could be, and was beginning to wonder what it would be like when things went back to normal and they were just neighbors again. The thought had actually been a bit depressing. Since his entrance, her life had been more exciting. She didn't feel so alone, so on her own, anymore. But now that he was grating on her nerves and proving to be an even bigger jerk than she had originally assumed, she wasn't feeling so bad about disentangling herself from him.

Still, she wondered what it would be like to walk to school every day again; what it would be like walking home in the cold and the dark and — even worse — in the snow. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before, but it didn't make the thought any more pleasing.

As she opened her locker and unzipped her backpack, she decided not to dwell on her future any more than necessary. She didn't know what lay in the road ahead; things could change within the next day or two far beyond her imagination's limits. For all she knew, Hargrove could be right and the creature wouldn't be susceptible to

normal weapons. And what then? What were they were going to do? What would happen to Hawkins?

And what about Barbara?

Randy grimaced. As much as she wished she could peek into the future, there really was no point in worrying about things beyond her control. Not especially with Hargrove involved. Things never did seem to work out like they should when he had a hand in them, anyway.

As she gathered her books for first period, a bang on her locker door made her jump.

"Meet me outside in five," Steve said as he walked by.

Randy shifted her books and slammed her locker closed.

"What about first period?" she called after him.

But he ignored her, and she lifted her free hand in annoyance.

"Between him and Hargrove, I'm going to *kill* someone," she grumbled to herself.

She contemplated ignoring his summons, leaving him to stand out there and freeze away his problems without her, but then she remembered that he had given her a ride home the night before — and had even offered her rides in the future — even though he had been down in the dumps with no obligation to assist her. She felt a wave of guilt for contemplating ditching him when he needed her help. After all, what had he done to her to deserve her grouch-fest? It was really Hargrove she wanted to punch in the stupid, handsome face, not Steve.

So, five minutes later she was outside and looking for his famously large head of hair. She stomped around in the frosty morning, books held tightly to her chest, until she spotted him leaning against the side of the building.

"At least it's better than a closet," she grumbled, making her way towards him.

When he saw her he straightened, and his face crumpled in relief. "I didn't think you'd actually show."

"Well, here I am." She gestured to herself, legs shaking. "What do you need? It's *freezing* out here."

"I was just gonna ask if you'd seen Nancy yet. I haven't seen her all morning, usually she's here by now."

Randy tutted. "You couldn't have asked me that *inside*?"

"Well, I—" He bobbed his head from side to side. "I mean, I guess I *could* have, but you know, it'd seem weird for me to be asking you about her when Nance and I are, ya know—"

"History?" she offered.

"I was *going* to say 'not speaking', but hey. Gentle was never a part of your vocabulary."

"I'm not gonna lie to you, Steve, I haven't seen her at all this morning." Randy shifted her weight. "And she *did* leave school pretty early yesterday..."

He stared at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Randy hesitated. *She* hadn't necessarily witnessed Nancy's exit, but others in the school had, including Ally. And from what she'd been told and overheard, Nancy had left early with Jonathan for who-knew-what at who-knew-where, and in high school that was a sure sign of suspicious activity.

"It's just- well, she *did* leave early, and she wasn't exactly *alone*..." She let the final word trail, awaited Steve's reaction.

"Yeah, you mean Byers," he said, licking his lips and looking away. "Yeah, I heard about that."

If his hair could have deflated along with the rest of him, it would have. But whatever he used in it to keep it standing sky-high held fast.

"But hey, that doesn't mean anything, right?" she said with much more vigor, hoping to ease the hurt puppy look overtaking his features. "She could have been sick and needed a ride home, there could have been a family emergency..."

"Thanks for trying Randy," he said, voice flat. "They left early together, they're late for school — I'm not an idiot. I've done it before, I know what it means."

The look of sheer defeat was horrifically painful, like someone had driven a knife into her chest and proceeded to twist it around like a key in a lock. Steve was the type of person who always looked chipper, who always acted like he was on top of the world. To some people, it was annoying. To her, it was just how Steve handled life. But seeing him so low that not even his usual mask of victorious indifference could help was like watching a puppy get kicked.

"Alright, listen," she began, lowering her voice and moving closer. "I think you need to talk to her. Like, *really* talk to her. Alone, outside of school. Buy her something nice, apologize, and see where things lie between you two."

"There's no point," he muttered bitterly. "It's over."

Randy straightened and frowned. "I thought you loved her."

"I *do*. A hell of a lot, trust me. It's just—"

"Then why aren't you fighting for her? If you really love her then darn it, Steve, stop being such a boob and do something about! Fight! Women want men to *chase* them, to *pursue* them, it's what makes them feel wanted and beautiful. Jonathan never chased her, he never fought for her. He's just standing on the sidelines, grabbing what's easy. But *you* can fight!"

Steve surveyed her, that familiar Harrington Fire rekindling in his eyes. She could see the conflict in him, but she could see her words were taking affect. If there was anything he was good at in life, it was being competitive, and she'd just given him a playing field.

"Alright," he said nodding, "Alright. But we need a game plan."

"Wait, 'we'?"

"Can you meet me at lunch to talk? We'll draw out a plan of attack, think of some things I can say that won't make everything worse."

"Okay, yeah, that's probably for the best. But no, I can't talk at lunch."

"Seriously? You're always available at lunch." He paused, surveyed her. "Wait, don't tell me you're going to do more research..."

"Oh, no, no. I'm, um, I'm going to meet with Mr. Ruble. I have some questions I have to ask him about the... the history assignment."

He looked confused. "There's a history assignment?"

"Yeah, the huge paper that's due," she lied smoothly, knowing it would probably come back to bite her. "Don't you *ever* pay attention in class?"

"Alright, skip the lecture, Goody Two-Shoes. We'll meet at your house tonight, how's that?"

Seemed an odd choice for a meet-up, but then again, it wasn't like she could drive anywhere. Of course he assumed she would be home, and on any normal night, his guess wouldn't be wrong. But that night in particular was going to be far from normal.

"What time are you thinking?" she asked, hands starting to sweat.

"I don't know, how about seven?"

It got dark at what, around five? Late five? That meant she and Hargrove had about an hour after dark to do what needed to be done, give or take. She should be home by seven, right?

"How about seven-thirty? I want to get a head start on that paper."

"Course you do. Seven-thirty it is. And hey, don't be late."

It was a joke because she was supposed to be home, but he had no idea how much of an actual threat that was to her. But she decided not to say anything, just watched as he made his way back inside.

She waited a few seconds, then followed, hoping Hargrove wasn't lurking in some corner to call her out. He wasn't, thank goodness, but the bell was, and its ringing had her sprinting to first period like her life depended on it.

The whole way there, though, she couldn't help but wonder how she was supposed to hunt a monster *and* solve Steve's love problems in a single night. It was like her life kept getting more and more complicated by the day.

16. The Shopping Trip

Randy wasn't actually going to Mr. Ruble's classroom for lunch. There wasn't even a paper due, but her constant fibs were coming easier and easier lately and the excuse had popped out without her thinking. No, it wasn't a paper that was on her plate that afternoon, but actually Hargrove.

After they had pulled into the school parking lot and Max had safely exited the vehicle, Hargrove had forced Randy back inside and given her very blunt instructions: to meet him at his car during lunch. When she'd asked why, he had looked annoyed and said, "Because we're going to get our hair done." After her look of mild terror he'd rolled his eyes and snapped, "Of course not, dipshit. We're going to buy ammo, gunpowder, and whatever other shit we might need to kill that son of a bitch. Unless you just want to use rulers and pencils?" She had ha-ha'ed then and gotten out of the car, but her lunch plans had apparently already been made. They were going to the local sporting goods store to stock up on weapons.

Of course, Steve couldn't know that. He had no idea that she'd been catching rides with Hargrove, let alone that she was going to go Hawkins-lab-experiment-hunting with him after school. Which made everything even more complicated, because he was supposedly coming over at seven-thirty to talk Operation Get Nancy Back and Randy had no idea if she was going to be home by then. How was she supposed to know how long her and Hargrove's field trip was supposed to last? It could be all night, it be a couple hours. And that was assuming they *found* it, but what if it didn't even show? Were they going to wait all night for it?

Randy cringed. A part of her was quietly hoping that the night would produce nothing. It was cowardly and stupid of her; if it didn't show up and they didn't kill it, their problems would just continue to snowball. But if she was being completely honest with herself, she was terrified of facing it again. It was horrific enough having it launch its unusual body at Hargrove's car, but now they were going after it without any sort of exterior protection — just guns and ammo and whatever other tricks Hargrove had up his sleeve. And what if

she couldn't react when she saw it, just like that first night? What if she froze? If it opened its face again, showing those horribly unusual jaws, she didn't think she would be able handle it. She liked to think that her first reaction would be to shoot its ugly head off, but she couldn't stop thinking of how she panicked that first night, how her body refused to move.

She slid her books into her locker then paused to finger the cash in her pocket, checking to make sure it was still there. It was. She would need it for their sporting goods trip, because she knew well enough that Hargrove wasn't going to fork money over for something he considered to be her problem. It was supposed to be for take-out and groceries for the rest of the week, her usual stipend, but she supposed saving Hawkins from a demon beast was probably more important than dinner. Probably.

Peeking at the clock over top her locker, she sighed. She had two minutes to sneak out of the school and meet Hargrove at his car without anyone noticing. If she was late, he'd been mad. If she got spotted, he'd be even *angrier*. If she was on time and unnoticed, he'd *still* be angry...

Gosh, it was just her rotten luck to get stuck with him, wasn't it?

A sudden bang on her locker door made her jump, and the metal came crashing against her fingers still resting inside. She yelped and snatched her hand back, nursed her bruised knuckles. With the door out of the way, she could see Tommy's leering face on the other side, his shoulder supporting his weight.

"Hey Peters."

Just his voice was enough to make her hair stand on end. After the Halloween party, she'd prayed he'd leave her alone forever. She hadn't dealt with his nonsense since Hargrove told him off, and even though she'd hoped with every fiber of her being that he'd chosen another target for his daily attacks, she knew it was only a matter of time until he regained some vigor to continue his antics with her. Sadly, she wasn't wrong.

"What the heck?" she snapped, rubbing her hand where a nice purple

bruise was already beginning to form across her fingers. "What do you want?"

"Nothing really." He shrugged, but that nasty grin was there. "Just wondering how losing your virginity was."

She scowled and slammed her locker closed. "What are you talking about? Did you get hit in the head during gym or something?"

"C'mon, Peters. No need to be shy. I saw Hargrove come to your rescue on Halloween night. I saw you get into his car." He leaned in. "And everyone knows that when a girl gets in his car, she's gettin' banged."

Randy's annoyance deepened, but she could feel the blood rushing to her face. She hadn't thought that her exit had been witnessed that night, and even if it had, there was so much alcohol in everyone's systems she'd figured no one would remember, anyway. But by the look on his face, she was in some deep trouble, and Hargrove wasn't going to like it.

"You must've been drunk off your rocker," she said, shaking her head. "I never went home with him. And he wasn't rescuing me, he had to go to the bathroom, remember? You're just embarrassed he scared you away."

She hoped he would take the bait, but for once in his shallow life, his pride meant less than her humiliation.

"Has anyone told you that you're a terrible liar?" he asked, wincing as if in pain. "Cause you're awful."

She had to reserve herself from saying "many times".

"Saw it with my own two eyes, Peters. You, him, and his shiny Camaro. You might as well fess up. The whole school's gonna know, anyway."

"There's *nothing* going on between me and Hargrove, so there's nothing for the school to know. And if he finds out you're spreading rumors about us, he's gonna kick your butt. He hates me just as much as you do."

That awful gleam sparked in his eye.

"Well, it's not me that's talkin' about your fun little night together." He lowered his voice, brows raising. "Carol's pretty pissed, you know?"

Randy groaned internally. If there was anyone that was as reckless and spiteful as Tommy, it was Carol. But unlike Tommy, Carol could corner her in the girl's bathroom. She'd been the target of those villainous acts before, and she really didn't want another repeat of seventh grade.

"Seriously? I didn't do anything with Hargrove," Randy argued. "And it's not like her and Hargrove are a thing, anyway, so why would it matter to her *who* he's with?"

"No, but Tina did," he said simply. "She really thought that her and Hargrove had something going. And Carol doesn't like when her friends are crossed. Especially not by geeks."

Yeah, that would be a problem. If Tommy told Carol and Tina that he'd seen her leave the party with Hargrove, she would have two very, very angry girls after her. And unfortunately, there was just no negotiating with emotionally charged teenagers. Her best bet was hoping that Hargrove would — or hopefully already *had* — cleared up the situation for her. If she was lucky, he might have some sway with them.

"Well, you can tell Carol and Tina that they can ask *Hargrove* the truth," she stated succinctly, moving to brush past him. "I'm sure he'll be happy to clear up your delusions."

But Tommy slammed his hand against the locker beside her head, forcing her to freeze.

"Stop lying, Peters," he said in a sing-song tone. "I hate lying."

"I'm *not* lying."

"You're making me angry." He leaned in so close she could smell his deodorant. "And I don't suggest that."

His behavior was reminiscent of the Halloween party, and for Randy, that was a very bad sign. With no alcohol in his system, she should have felt more comfortable knowing that he had full control over his actions, but knowing he was in his right frame of mind and still pushing the boundaries between bullying and harassing made the situation far more disconcerting. It was like he was actually crazy enough to pull something heinous right there in the middle of the school hallway.

"If you want to know the truth," she said, enunciating every word, "then talk to Hargrove. Until then, leave. Me. Alone."

His expression of wicked glee melted into pure malice, and Randy's pulse quickened as he reached towards her—

"Hey, Freckles," a voice cut in.

But Tommy wasn't given an opportunity to reply: two hands slammed against his shoulders and ripped him backwards, and Randy, finally capable of breathing, shoved away from her prison and into the open hallway. And there he was, holding Tommy against the lockers by his shirt—

Billy Hargrove.

How was it that they hated each other *so much*, yet he always seemed to arrive when she needed him most?

—

Billy practically kicked the doors in when he finally reached the school. The cigarette he had been inhaling to keep his cool was now no more than a stub, and he flicked it behind him as he shoved his way inside, jaw locked, neck tight, eyes narrowed.

His destination was the cafeteria, but today, he had no plans on eating lunch. No, he was going to sit in that damn room and he was going to *burn* Peters with his *eyes*. He was going to set her on freaking fire, and he was going to watch her smolder with cold-hearted joy. He hoped she crumbled into a pile of ash, that she became just another spot on the floor for people to trample, because being swept

up by the janitor and thrown into a trashcan would be a much better fate than becoming monster take-out, which is *exactly* what she was going to become when he made her walk home after school. If she thought that she could get away with making a fool out of him, she was wrong. Because he was pissed — *royally* pissed — and she was going to pay.

"Screw you Peters," he hissed to himself.

If she wanted her monster dead so bad, *she* could do it herself. He had agreed to help like the decent asshole that he was, and what did she do? She stood him up. She left him to sit in his car for *ten minutes* like a total idiot while she did god-knew-what with god-knew-who, wasting his precious lunch with, apparently, her far more important schedule. If it was anything like the day before, she was probably stumbling out of a closet with that idiot Harrington. As soon as she knew how pissed he was, she would make up some lame-ass homework excuse for her no-show. But too damn bad. He was officially washing his hands of her and everything she came with. And this time, he meant it.

No more Peters. No more monsters. No more problems.

"—are a thing, anyway, so why would it matter to her *who* he's with?"

Billy's steps slowed. He recognized that voice...

"No, but Tina did," Tommy's voice joined. "She really thought that her and Hargrove had something going. And Carol doesn't like when her friends are crossed. Especially not by geeks."

Oh shit.

Billy lowered his head and plowed forward, determined to pass Peters and Tommy without being noticed. He may have saved her ass Halloween night, but he wasn't about to go doing it again, especially not after she stood him up.

"Well, you can tell Carol and Tina that they can ask *Hargrove* the truth. I'm sure he'll be happy to clear up your delusions."

"Stop lying, Peters. I hate lying."

"I'm *not* lying."

Billy was trying to stay aloof but he could see the two against the lockers, Tommy looking like a wolf with his shit-eating grin. It was pitiful, really. Peters was such an easy target. She talked big and she acted like the world's shit just bounced off her, but if it wasn't for him she may have went through a whole lot more than she wanted to on Halloween night. And things certainly weren't looking pleasant for her now, either. Trouble followed her like a magnet.

Don't you dare get involved, bastard, he warned himself. *Stay the hell out of it.*

Right. No more Peters, no more monsters, no more problems. He just needed to walk away.

"You're making me angry," Tommy warned darkly. "And I don't suggest that."

Don't get involved. Just keep walking, Billy chanted in his head.

"If you want to know the truth, then talk to Hargrove," Peters said again, sounding more desperate than her usual cocky comebacks. "Until then, leave. Me. Alone."

Just stay out of it. Don't do anything stupid. Don't—

Tommy reached for Peters, and something in Billy snapped.

"Hey, Freckles," he barked.

He gave no other warning as he stormed up behind Tommy and slammed his hands onto his shoulders. Billy ripped Tommy backwards and fisted the front of his shirt, slammed him against the lockers with enough force to make teeth rattle and freckles dance.

It took Tommy a second to regain himself, blinking at Billy like he didn't quite recognize his aggressor, but once he came to his senses his smile grew sharp, his jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed into slits. Unlike at the Halloween party, there was no conflict in his expression, no hesitation. In fact, he just looked...

Amused.

"So Romeo came to save Juliet after all," he drawled, and Billy's grip tightened. "Looks like your little night together made you soft, Hargrove."

Billy slammed Tommy against the lockers again, but the smug look remained stubbornly in place.

"I think its time you shut your damn mouth, Freckles," Billy murmured dangerously, "Or should I shut it for you?"

He slammed Tommy again, but Tommy only laughed.

"Ah man, she must be something under the sheets if she's got you like this! I wouldn't mind a piece of that action, Peters — how does Saturday work for you?"

"Son of a bitch—" Billy growled, heaved him up, and then threw him onto the hallway floor.

Tommy slid against the muddied linoleum tile, and though the impact should have had him jumping up with readied fists, his laughter only grew.

"You know," he managed to squeeze out, pushing himself to his feet with shaking shoulders, "I thought Halloween was just a coincidence. But today—" he straightened, pointed a wagging finger at Billy, "today proved me wrong. Congratulations you two, my best wishes for the happy couple!"

"Its time to cut the bullshit," Billy warned. "You *and* your whore."

"Or what?" Tommy took a step forward. "You gonna hit me? 'Cause you and I both know that's not gonna put this fire out."

Billy clenched his jaw and flexed his fingers, but as much as he wanted to hit Tommy, he knew he was right. Starting a fight in school would only make things worse, both in school with a vengeful Tommy and a bitchy Carol, and at home with his pissed old man.

Tommy grinned triumphantly. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Tough

when being a badass doesn't solve all your problems."

He turned and made his way down the hall with a swagger so purposeful it made Billy sick. But as much as he hated to admit it, he was feeling that familiar sense of humiliation creeping up his spine, the kind he only felt around his old man.

He'd been outwitted. Tommy hadn't started shit so they could fight — he did it so he could see Billy's reaction. He liked prodding the bull and then leaving it to steam, it was his way of getting a victory when fists wouldn't cut it. And despite the rumors, Halloween night had been chalked up to pure coincidence. It had been another ploy to piss off Billy, and this time, it had worked. Very well. And while Tommy had assumed that nothing had happened between him and Peters, Billy had just proved him wrong. If the whole school didn't think that he had something going on with Peters before, they certainly would now.

Well shit. His bad day was just going to keep snowballing, wasn't it?

He glanced at Peters, expecting to see that idiotic look on her face, but instead he caught her trying to slink away without him noticing.

"Hey dipshit!" he barked, and she jumped. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

She seemed to debate her options, gripping her backpack straps and shuffling her feet. But Billy didn't wait for her to make up her mind. He stalked over to her, grabbed the top of her backpack, and dragged her behind him as he made his way to the school doors.

"Hey—!" She struggled against him, flailing her arms. "What are you doing!"

"We have a monster to kill."

"Wait, right *now*?"

"Are you some kind of genius?" he snapped incredulously. "Of course not *right now*. You think we're going to throw pencils at it until it dies?"

"Well, excuse me. Maybe you would like to elaborate on where you're dragging me, then?"

"We're going to buy shit to kill it. Ammo. Gunpowder. Lighter fluid. Raw meat."

"But lunch is almost over, we only have, like. ten minutes left and—wait, did you just say *raw meat*?"

"Unless you want to be bait."

She seemed to think about this, then, "Raw meat sounds fine. But seriously, we're going to be late next period if we leave now—"

Billy shoved her to a stop, jolting both of them, and turned on her so fast his neck cracked.

"You have made my life a living *hell* since that night I helped you. If killing that son of a bitch is going to get me away from you and back to my normal life, then I'll blow it to fucking *China* if I have to. And if that means we have to be late to next period, then you'll just have to suck it up and *be late*." When she only stared at him, blinking, he barked, "Kapeesh?"

She nodded her head vigorously.

"Good."

He pulled her behind him again and out the double doors, through the parking lot, and to the car. She was silent the rest of the way, and aside from the occasional stumble to keep up, she didn't fight him. Billy thought it was the least that she owed him, considering his school life was shit and he was supposed to try and kill an alien dog thanks to her. Not to mention he'd saved her life (*twice*), rescued her from Tommy (also twice), and driven her all over Hawkins. At the rate she was going, she would wrack up such a bill by the end of the month that she would never be able to repay it.

The drive to the sporting goods store was slow and mostly quiet. He didn't have much to say and it was clear that she didn't, either. But silence was something that had come to be a norm between them; it seemed that if they weren't bickering or trying not to die, they

weren't doing much of anything. Which was fine. Billy didn't care one way or other what she had to say; when she did speak, it was either batshit crazy or brought him a whole hell of a lot of trouble. Typically both. But a "thank you" or "hey, you're the best" *would* be appreciated every once in a while.

"Your mirror's still broke," she pointed out, breaking the peace.

Billy's eye twitched.

"No shit, Sherlock."

"I thought you were going to get it fixed?" she asked.

"Yeah, well, between babysitting you and trying not to get eaten, I haven't had the time."

Nothing else was said, and Billy pulled into the store's parking lot with a jerk of the wheel.

It had been all business and determination only seconds ago, but once the Camaro was off and the building feet away, something heavy hung in the air. Neither of them moved from their seats, Billy still gripping the wheel and Peters clinging to her backpack. They stared at the Hunting & Camping sign like it marked their death, like they were about to go headstone shopping instead of browsing for hunting gear.

After a moment of stifled waiting, Peters spoke.

"Well, lets get this over with," she said.

For once, Billy actually agreed with her.

They threw their doors open and clambered out, avoiding each other's eye as they made their way to the entrance. A bell overhead jingled when they pushed the door open, the smell of grease, metal, and canvas hitting Billy like a tidal wave. It wasn't his first time in a sporting goods store, but it had been many years since he'd last gone into one. He'd almost forgotten what it was like. He used to go every week with his dad to buy baseball gear — gloves, balls, bats — back when he still played, when he still tried to please his dad. The day

he'd given that up was the day he'd vowed to never walk into another sporting goods store again.

Irony was a real bitch.

The place was a lot smaller than the ones he'd gone to in California, though. It was two squished rooms — the first, where they were at, which had only the front counter, boxes of ammo, and lines of guns; the second had aisles full of different gear and tools and some hangers with military surplus and hunting clothes, from what Billy could see. Guns lined the walls and boxes of ammo were stacked under the glass counter in the tiny front area where they stood. Here it reeked of gun cleaning oil and lead, canvas and the faint smell of cigar smoke. A middle aged man was rifling through these stacks with his back turned to them, and he gave a dry greeting, one they didn't bother to return.

Billy didn't wait for Peters to lead the way — he brushed past her and grabbed an empty shopping basket by the entrance.

The second room was a little larger and just as overcrowded as the first. A large green sign reading "AUTUMN SALE 30% OFF ARMY SURPLUS" hung on the back wall, and rows of cluttered and disorganized aisles filled the room. Here it smelled like leather and mink oil (something that threw Billy back to his baseball days), metal and canvas, and that distinct smell of old — possibly rust, possibly mildew, maybe a bit of both. Fishing poles and tackle, flashlights, camping gear, tools, traps, rope, bows, arrows, Carhartt jackets, waders, and piles of other outdoor junk made fishing through the aisles a pain. To add to the mess, Billy had no idea *what* it was he was actually looking for.

Of course he knew they needed weapons — machetes, possibly, maybe an ax, even a baseball bat would help — and hunting gear — or more specifically, bear traps and something to lure the creature with. But otherwise, he was lost. His dad kept a shotgun in the upstairs closet, so he would definitely need a few boxes of buckshot. But what else? What was he supposed to use to hunt an alien creature? What was he supposed to use to *kill* it?

As he skimmed the aisles, he tossed what he saw as useful into the

shopping basket. He tried not to think too hard about what he grabbed, because every time he did he had to pause and ask himself if he was going completely insane. And every time he asked that he would peek around for Peters, spot her digging through clutter, and realize that yes, he *was* going insane. So instead he just stopped thinking, kept grabbing. Two bear traps, some stakes, an ax, a baseball bat, a box of nails for good measure, and two flashlights. There was no machete to be seen, but he figured what the hell. If an ax and a gun didn't cut it, a machete wouldn't, either.

As he was turning down the next aisle, Peters came up from behind him and dumped something into the cart. He stared down at the addition, rose a brow.

"Lighter fluid?" he asked. "What, you wanna torch it?"

"We don't know what's going to kill it," she said, shrugging. "If hitting it with your car at a hundred miles an hour didn't, we need to explore all avenues." She paused, glancing at what he had found. "An ax... traps... wait, is that a baseball bat? And you laughed at me!"

Billy pulled out the box of nails and shook them in her face. "Hammer these puppies through it, and you have a lethal weapon."

"Ugh, I don't want to know how you came up with something so barbaric," she muttered, batting the box away.

"Creativity," he said simply.

"*Morbid*," she corrected.

After they had scoured the store from top to bottom and their next class ticked steadily away, they made their way to the cash register and dumped their findings onto the counter. The man looked at their pile of mass destruction.

"And two boxes of buckshot," Billy said.

An eyebrow lift from the guy.

"And, uh." Peters paused, glanced at Billy. "What does an M1 Garand take?"

"An M1?" Billy asked, astounded.

"Yeah, what does it take?"

"You mean thirty ought six?" the man asked.

"Sure," she agreed. "I'll take two boxes of... that. Yeah."

The man placed two boxes of buckshot and two boxes of thirty ought six onto the counter, then rose his critical gaze to them.

Billy had purchased some questionable shit in his lifetime, and he had no qualms about throwing that stuff in front of a cashier and smiling like he was paying for milk and eggs. But this was a whole new level of questionable. He actually had to fight to keep an expression of indifference as the guy looked him and Peters up and down like he was wondering if he should call the cops.

"Lemme guess," the guy finally muttered, expressionless, "Monster hunting?"

They looked at each other, then back at the guy.

"Yep," Peters said with cheer.

He snorted and shook his head, then rang them up and sent them on their way.

Back in the Camaro, Billy took out a cigarette and lit it, puffed on it a few times, and then rubbed his forehead.

"An M1 Garand? Seriously?" he grunted.

"What?" she asked, slamming her door closed. The weapons of mass destruction were safely in the backseat. "My grandpa fought in the War. It's a family heirloom."

"You just keep that laying around, or what?"

"It's under my parents' bed, just in case someone breaks in." At his look, she demanded, "So what? You've got a shotgun."

"Yeah, but that's not a *war artifact*, dipshit. It's just an old hunting gun we keep in a closet."

"Well, it'll still come in use," she concluded, holding her head high.

Billy rolled his eyes and started the car, then pulled out of the parking lot. As he drove, the strange atmosphere of camaraderie that had developed between him and Peters melted into one of tense reluctance. He could tell she was dreading their return to school just as much as he was, and probably for very similar reasons.

If they arrived late together, having both been missing for lunch and for all of fourth period, the rumors about them would escalate. Not to mention Tommy would use their absence as bait for more trouble. For Billy, that meant a very pissed Carol and Tina, a ruined weekend, a tarnished school rep, and a complete loss of control over his high school life. He knew he wouldn't necessarily lose his sway over students, especially not Tina and her entourage (they would forget things pretty quick once he had them alone), but once the idea was out that he was a softie for the school geeks, there was no way of really getting rid of it. He would no longer be on the pedestal that he had stolen from Harrington. And for him, it was like watching the only control that he ever had slip from his fingers.

Billy gritted his teeth and pressed the pedal further into the ground. The speedometer's needle slowly climbed as the car sped, Hawkins High coming into view when he aggressively turned the wheel and screeched onto the main road. Speed always seemed to ease his frustrations, but this time, it only brought him closer to the last place he wanted to be. And Peters' presence only made things worse, even when she wasn't talking. Just something about her *being* there made his nerves tingle all over and his brain foggy, and he wasn't sure if his head wanted to explode or what the hell was going on. He was just so... *angry*. And she certainly didn't help.

When they pulled into the school parking lot, Peters went inside first. Billy stayed out and stuffed their weapons under the backseat, then gave it a few minutes before waltzing in himself. His efforts to smooth over their absence were probably in vain, especially with Tommy's nose to the ground like some kind of bloodhound. Still, he didn't hear much about it for the rest of the day, not from Tommy

and not from anyone else. Tina was cool to him and Carol just plain icy, but Tommy avoided him, and if there were whispers about him and Peters going around, he didn't catch wind of a single one. Even so, something in his gut told him shit was about to go down, and it was a feeling he knew well enough than to ignore.

But if Tommy had something up his sleeve, he did a good job of hiding it. The rest of the day went more smoothly than the morning had, and Billy found that even though he liked being left alone, it was also maddening. It would have been one thing if he had *chosen* to avoid Tina and her entourage, but since Tommy had made that decision for him, the silence was only humiliating. It was suddenly as if he had just fallen to Harrington's level, and the realization was aggravating. A deposed king after deposing a king. And it was no thanks to Peters, who seemed to increasingly throw his life out of his own control one day at a time.

Randy decided that it would be better for everyone if she met Hargrove at his car *on time* after school. Her tardiness had nearly cost her her life at lunch, and she really didn't want another repeat of crazy Hargrove. She'd had more than enough of *that* for one day. In general, she'd had more than enough of being *late*.

Arriving to fourth period with only five minutes left of class was far worse than she could have ever imagined. She'd been so flustered at the sporting goods store that she'd never had a moment to think of an excuse for her tardiness. Her "ums" and "wells" and finally her totally lame "I got stuck in the bathroom" lie hadn't been well received, and she was pretty sure the only reason she got off without being chewed out or having her parents called was because she was *always* on time. Not to mention she had one of the best grades in the whole class. Still, it was a memory that would haunt her, and she vowed to never repeat it again. Especially not with Hargrove.

Speaking of which, he looked especially tense as he leaned against his car, cigarette hanging between his lips. It was a sight she'd gotten used to, and it was almost sad that she could tell the difference in his posture now. Before their "dynamic duo," he had just been handsome but stupid Billy Hargrove, the neighbor that she loved to pester. If

she'd been asked what he was thinking, she would have said, "Probably something about naked women", and really, that was about all she could say. Now, though, she could read the anxiety radiating off him in waves. His face was set, stony, lacking that usual smooth arrogance he always carried. His shoulders were arched forward just a bit, his cigarette swiftly vanishing between his lips as he breathed it like it was oxygen.

Max wasn't there yet, but Randy had a feeling his agitation had very little to do with his not-sister's lateness. It was probably more along the lines of "we have to go kill a demon monster tonight". At least, that was what *Randy* was nervous about, anyway. She was just assuming that he shared in that anxiety, but she could be wrong. Maybe it really *was* just Max's lateness and she was reading too much into it.

He didn't say anything when she popped open the passenger door and slid into the Camaro. He didn't even act like he *noticed*. She was on time, though, so she was trying not to sweat it; he looked like he was thinking about something, so maybe he really didn't know she was there? 'Lost in thought', and all that.

"Glad you finally decided to show," he muttered, tapping his finger on the hood of the car.

Or not.

"I'm on time," she pointed out.

"For once."

"Hey, lunch wasn't *my* fault. If you want to blame anyone for me being late, blame Tommy."

And that was the end of the conversation. It was a bad thing to bring up, she knew — he was obviously still not happy about flushing his bad boy rep down the toilet for her. And honestly, she couldn't blame him. If they were in each other's shoes, *she* would be mad about having to save *his* sorry butt from a pathetic bully, especially if it spelled the end of her social career.

And so the silent treatment continued until Max finally showed, though his sudden awakening may have been a bad thing for everyone. He was clearly in a foul mood (probably no thanks to Randy and her brilliant conversation choices), and Max became his target.

"That kid you were talking to," he began coolly, pushing off the hood and making his way to the driver's side, "who is he?"

Randy opened her door and clambered out, pushing the seat out of the way so Max could climb into the back.

"He's no one," she responded offhandedly, switching her skateboard to her other arm.

"No one?"

A pause. Then,

"This kid from my class," she explained, sliding into the backseat.

Randy could tell she wanted that to be the end of it. Hargrove, on the other hand, obviously did not.

He dropped into his seat and slammed his door shut. Randy followed, but she had a feeling the ride home was going to be a tense one. Not that Hargrove was famous for being the friendliest of chauffeurs, but with the weight of their fun hunting trip later that night hanging over their heads and now his sudden — and dangerous — interest in Max's classmate, it was going to be a long, rough ride. That was, of course, if they ever made it out of the parking lot.

Lighting a new cigarette, he leaned back into his seat and asked, "Why was he talking to you?"

"It was just about a stupid class assignment," she answered, sounding more and more hopeful that it would be the end of the Hargrove Inquisition.

He sniffed, shifted in his seat. "Then why are you so upset?"

"I'm not!"

"He causing you trouble?"

Max seemed to steel herself, then snapped, "Why do you care?"

"Because, Max, you're a piece of shit, but we're family now whether we like it or not." His cigarette spewed wisps out the window, his jaw held tight. "Meaning I'm stuck looking after you."

Randy couldn't see Max in the backseat, but Hargrove was half turned towards her, half facing forward, and the sudden shadow that spilled over his features was a clear indication that something about Max's expression was more than a little disrespectful towards him.

She exclaimed, "Oh, what would I *ever* do without—"

"Hey!" he cut her off, reaching back and roughly snatching at her, though Randy couldn't see what he had grabbed. "This is serious shit, okay? I'm older than you. And something you learn is that there are certain types of people in this world that you stay away from. And that kid, Max," he jerked her forward, gaze icy, "that kid is one of them. You stay away from him, you hear me? Stay. Away."

He practically threw her away then turned back around in his seat. He shoved the keys into the ignition, roared the engine to life, and shot backwards out of the parking space, tires squealing. As he drove, Randy let her confusion boil in silence. She knew perfectly well how much of a jerk he could be — she'd been on the receiving end of his foul attitude more than she cared to recall. Still, if she was being honest, the sudden vehemence towards Max's classmate didn't add up. Really, what *did* it have to do with him? And why did he care?

He was always refusing to call Max his sister, was always trying to sweep their familial ties under the rug. He hated her, and she hated him, and that was just the way it was. So this sudden "big brother" protective attitude — what was *that* all about? Because if Randy knew anything about Hargrove, it was that everything he did had a front. And she had a sneaking suspicion that his strange interest in Max's social life had little to do with a desire to protect her.

Just as she had suspected, the ride home was silent and tense. Neither Hargrove nor Max said anything else about the incident, and

Randy decided it would be best if she kept her mouth shut, too. By the time they reached their street, the car was so thick with disdain that someone could have cut a hole in the atmosphere with a knife. Max remained silent as she slid out, not even offering a "see ya" to Randy. Hargrove, too, reserved his words, but once Max was safely in the house he dug the weapons out from beneath the Camaro's backseats and carried them to Randy's front door. She allowed him to set them in her living room for the time being (she didn't exactly have anyone to hide them from), then, without a goodbye or even a reminder of what time he would be over later that evening, he left.

And Randy was left to wait.

A/N: Okay, so I don't usually leave these because I *hate* reading them at the bottom of fanfictions when I'm reading (it just ruins the mojo?), but I HAVE to thank all of you guys for reading, favoriting, following, and reviewing! Seriously, I never expected to have so many awesome readers when I posted this story. It was one of those fanfictions that I have had so much fun writing but figured no one would really read it, so I kind of posted it figuring I might have one or two readers but jiminy cricket, ya'll. I have been blown away.

I do want to apologize for how long it's taken me to get this next chapter posted. I've been stuck in a bit of a writing funk lately, so getting any decent words out has been torturous. I feel like it's taken me a century to get this chapter written, and even though it's pretty darn long, I didn't even get everything in it that I wanted to! So it kind of cuts off awkwardly, but hopefully the next chapter makes up for it?

Also, to my Guest reviewer who has been leaving such detailed and beautiful reviews for EACH chapter: I love you. I wanted to message you and respond to your reviews individually, but you're a Guest so I can't. *cries* Just know that I appreciate everything you say and that I am loving your perception! You have hit everything spot-on, and I really, really can't wait for you to read the next chapter!

And because my Guest reviewer brought this up, I wanted everyone to know that I have kept Randy's appearance low-key so that the story could be enjoyed as either an OC story or a reader insert. I also like my readers to be able to picture the character in their head for

themselves based on personality and nuances. I feel like telling my readers what my characters look like to the T is so restrictive for their imaginations! But for all that are curious as to what she looks like: Randy has very dark brown frizzy hair. I mean, it's even frizzy for the 80's. She's short, too. And she's not super stylish - she's a geek! And she dresses like one. :D She is far from the typical Billy Hargrove OC who is sexy and stylish and seductive. She is plain, witty, and we love her and all her frizziness! 3

17. The Mission

Billy pushed down on the lid of the trunk, closing it with a *slam* that echoed across the street. He planted his hands on the purring Camaro, took in the steadily darkening sky, then lifted his watch.

5:30

It was the last thing that needed to be done. The shotgun and the M1 had been loaded, the flashlights were filled with fresh batteries, and the bat had been pounded through with nails. A pale of raw beef chunks were were already waiting in the car, and the traps were ready to be set. Now that the car was filled with a small armory, the only thing left was to sit their asses down and actually leave. Unfortunately, the concept was harder to achieve than it should have been.

Peters, in all her grace and glory, had gotten herself so nerved up she'd been in the bathroom for at least thirty minutes. What she was doing in there Billy didn't care to know, because there was no way a human could sit on a toilet that long and not have their legs fall off. Of course, he couldn't rightfully blame her, either. He'd kept up a good farce as he filled the trunk, cut the meat, and loaded the guns, but the anxiety gnawing at his gut was hard to ignore. And for good damn reason, too. It wasn't every night he hunted monsters in dark woods, especially those that could take a hit from a car pushing a hundred miles an hour without so much as getting a scratch. If that wasn't reason enough to be nervous, he didn't know what was.

Still, it wasn't like he was taking a half hour shit because of it. Peters had completely missed the set-up of their hunting excursion while she was sitting on the toilet, and now she was costing them precious daylight. They needed all the time they could get to walk deep into the woods, lay down traps, and find a place to hunker down while they waited for the four-legged freak to find their meat pile, and at the rate they were going, they weren't going to have enough time.

Pushing off the car, he started to make his way back towards the house, jaw clenching and unclenching. He didn't have to go too far, though — Peters burst through the door with her jacket half-on and

her hair a wild, frizzy frenzy before he even made it to the porch.

"Sorry," she breathed, rushing to the passenger side. "Got caught up."

He snorted. "On what — the toilet?"

"Ha ha," she retorted humorlessly, pulling the latch and yanking the door open.

He slid into his seat, too, snapped the door shut and put his hands on the wheel.

"You got the flashlights, right?" he asked, shifting the car into reverse.

She lifted them up in reply.

"And the map?"

It rustled as she waved it in the air.

Billy exhaled, spun the wheel as he pulled out of the driveway. "Great."

But "great" was the least appropriate word for it. If anything, it was the very *opposite* of what he — and he was sure Peters — was thinking.

Sure, he'd faced a lot of shit in his life. He had plenty of monsters knocking at his door that were for more terrifying than some crazed lab experiment with a hankering for human. In fact, he didn't know if he should boast or be humiliated by the fact that the only thing that truly scared him was his old man. Still, it wasn't every day he set out with the school's biggest weirdo to hunt down an escaped government experiment. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't at least a *little* nervous, especially after what it did to his car. The missing mirror was just a nice, friendly reminder of what they were going to be playing with in those dark woods. Alone.

Peters assumed that it would take more than a speeding car to take the four-legged freak out. If the thing truly walked away Halloween night without a scratch, they were going to have a hell of a time on their hands trying to kill it. They'd have to set their traps carefully

and be as strategic as they possibly could with the little amount of time that they had. If they could bombard it, they might have a chance. Maybe cut off its head. Maybe torch it. If all else failed, they had guns. And there was no way that thing was walking away from a shotgun or an M1. There was just no way.

As houses gave way to sparse trees and brush, fields and barely lit winding roads, Billy reached down and flicked on the radio. The Camaro's headlights hit the lines in the road like a spotlight, shooting shadows in every direction and making the leafless trees around them look like jagged lines of ink. Music poured from the speakers, but this time, it didn't ease his anxiety. He could tell that Peters was fighting to keep herself under control; she hadn't looked away from the map the entire drive, just kept studying it like something new was going to pop up. Her hands were shaking, too, making the paper twitch back and forth.

"How long?" Billy asked.

Peters blinked and lowered the map. "Oh, uh, just right up here."

He exhaled and shifted in his seat, draping his wrist over the wheel.

"I'm assuming you have some sort of plan here, right?"

"Uh, no. *I* was assuming *you* had a plan," she retorted, snapping her gaze to him. "You're the one that's been all bossy, bossy about this whole thing." She paused. "You *do* have a plan... right?"

"The hell you askin' me for? That was your job, dipshit. You're the one who wanted to kill it, remember?"

"But you're the control freak!"

"You shitting me right now?" he barked over the radio. "This was your stupid idea and you don't even have a *plan*?"

"I don't know, I just figured that with our small arsenal we would just, ya know, charge in there all Spartan-like and you would handle the rest!"

Silence.

Then,

"We're going to die," she rasped.

Billy rolled his eyes. "Keep your pants on, Peters. We'll think of something."

"Like what? This isn't deer hunting, Hargrove. This isn't even *bear* hunting. We're going to charge into a dark forest to try and kill something that withstood even *your* driving, and we don't even know if we *can* kill it!"

"Would you get a grip?" he snapped hotly. "We have resources. We have strategy. We just need to put it all together. You start panicking and we're both monster dinner, got it?"

She inhaled, exhaled, the map rattling in her fingers.

"Okay," she managed. "Keeping calm, sorry."

He rubbed his eyes, shook his head.

The scenery was becoming familiar, now. The bend in the road, the small field up ahead visible. He could still see his tire marks, the torn up grass and kicked mud from where the creature had forced him off the road Halloween night, and he pulled over. Daylight was fading fast — it was almost fully dark, and they knew for a fact that the thing was nocturnal. They would have only a few minutes to set some sort of trap for it before darkness fully fell. Knowing their luck, it would show up before they were even ready.

Billy threw the car into park and shut off the engine. Peters gathered the flashlights and the map together, and as they threw their doors open, a bang in the back of the car made them freeze.

"What was that?" she whispered.

Bang!

"How should I know?" he asked, scowling.

Some scuffling, another bang, and the car twitched.

Billy made his way to the trunk, Peters following close behind. When they had reached the back end, they could see the lid moving up and down, as if something inside was throwing itself against it, trying to escape.

They shared a look before Billy reached down and carefully popped the trunk. He lifted it slowly, Peters backing away, and—

"No damn way."

And there it was: that damned orange tabby that Peters tried throwing through his window every morning, huddled against their arsenal as it released a torrent of volatile noises.

"What's your cat doing here?" she asked, peering down at its disgruntled expression, as if it couldn't believe they had the audacity to leave it in there.

"Holy shit, are you kidding me right now? *It's not my ca—*"

Without warning, it leapt from the car and onto Billy's shoulder, winding itself around his neck. He growled and scooped it off of him, tossed it to the ground where it landed silently on the gravel on all fours.

"Whatever you say, Fabio. It certainly likes you enough to be yours." She reached down to scratch it as it traipsed around their feet, curling and uncurling itself around their legs. "But seriously, how did it get in your trunk?"

"How should I know? It wasn't when I closed it."

"Well, it *must* have been."

"You think I *purposefully* packed a cat? Really?"

She shrugged. "You've certainly done weirder things."

Billy threw his hands up.

"We don't have time for this!" he exclaimed. "Just get your gun and the meat and help me carry this shit so we can go kill that thing!"

"What about the cat?" she asked, sounding more concerned for its safety than their own.

"What do you mean 'what about the cat'? Why the hell does that matter?"

"But the monster—"

"—Will be after *us*. The stupid cat will be fine. Now would you *help* me? We've got about ten minutes of light left and you're worrying about a cat."

Peters mumbled curses under her breath, but she did as he asked. The M1 she slung over her shoulder, the shotgun he slung over his. He took the bat and she took the ax, and he grabbed both of the traps and the meat while she carried the lighter fluid, map, and flashlights.

As they began to make the trek into the steadily darkening woods, she paused to shoo the cat away from following them, watched it slink back towards the car, and then inched behind Billy into the trees. Within seconds, what was left of daylight was swallowed by the entangled limbs around them. Peters kicked on their flashlights and waved the beam as they walked, lighting up gnarled trees, broken branches, and dead leaves.

"Hey, Hargrove?" she asked tentatively.

"What?"

"I was just thinking—" The light hit an owl, which took off and nearly gave them both a heart attack. Billy shook himself, plowed on, and Peters continued, "Well, maybe we should have gotten here a little earlier..."

For once in his life, he actually agreed with her.

"We'll be fine," he said shortly. "Where are we?"

"Um." She fidgeted with her full hands, managed to get the map out and rustle it open. "Er, I think we're somewhere right here."

She motioned to a general area in the woods, a few centimeters from

the bend in the road where they had parked. Seemed about right for an approximation. Nothing within a mile or so of them, it seemed, only trees. About two miles northeast, smack-dab in the middle of the wooded area on the map, was a building. No label. No name. Just a building.

"The hell's that?" he asked, jerking his chin at the shape.

Peters craned her neck. "That's the lab where my parents work."

He grunted. "That thing's hangin' pretty close to a government facility, huh?"

"That's what I've been trying to *tell* you," she huffed, lowering the map. "I think its connected with the lab *and* Barbara's death."

They continued walking again, feet crunching over the undergrowth.

"You said she disappeared last year," Billy pointed out, brushing past a tree. "Why would that thing wait a whole year to attack again?"

"I don't know..." she trailed. Paused. Then, "Maybe they captured it, but it got loose again?"

"If that's the case, these 'scientists' are shit at their jobs," he mumbled.

"I'm sure it's pretty humiliating."

"It'll be even more humiliating when some high schoolers kill it."

Crickets and frogs chirped from the trees, the distant call of an owl making Peters wave the flashlight behind them. Just as Billy thought, daylight was completely burned out, and they hadn't even started their set-up yet. Running behind schedule was annoying. Running behind schedule with their lives on the line was *really* annoying.

Peters shook out the map and came a stop. Lowering the lighter fluid and shifting her grip to take Billy's flashlight from under her arm, she said, "This should be good."

It seemed that they were now deep enough in the woods where they wouldn't have to worry about the four-legged freak wreaking havoc

on any innocent bystanders. Of course, that hadn't been Billy's idea — Peters insisted, kept saying she didn't want another "Barbara incident" if things went wrong. If he'd had it his way, they'd be shooting it from the car and getting the hell out of there if the idea went to shit. But hey, he supposed dying in the middle of a forest where no one would ever find his body was cool, too.

"Let's get this over this," he mumbled, throwing down the traps.

As Hargrove set the stage for their leathery friend, Randy acted as light-bearer and scout. It should have been an easy job — shining the flashlight where he needed it, keeping an eye and ear out for monsters — but given their situation, she was pretty fairly paranoid, which meant every creak, crack, and groan was a sure sign they were about to die. It was awful, really, the suspense. She felt like a character in a horror film. And as if hunting a freak experiment wasn't bad enough, the atmosphere was just too perfect for something bad *not* to happen. The woods were dark as pitch, the only things visible were what the flashlight's beam touched: gnarled trees, dead leaves, and shadows. Lots of shadows. The sounds of night, too, were suddenly far more than just sounds; they were eyes, voices, creatures watching them from the trees, from every direction. Sometimes the distant hoot of an owl joined, like some skin-crawling chorus. To add to the cliché, a fog was beginning to filter in, covering the earth with a wispy layer of dense paper. All they needed now was a dramatic horror-flick track and they would be set for their violent death scenes.

"Shit, I can't— Peters! I can't see a damn thing, *stand still!*" Hargrove barked, waving at the growing fog.

Randy jolted the beam of light back in his direction, not realizing she had been veering off with it in her obsessive staring. It was a vulnerable feeling, not being able to see one's surroundings. Anything could be lurking around them — behind them. She felt this constant urge to wave her flashlight in some sort of petty merry-go-round, fearful of what it would illuminate in the dark.

But unlike her, Hargrove didn't appear to be the least bit perturbed

by their situation. He was aggravated, sure, but probably more from her than their surroundings. Which was annoying, because Randy couldn't figure out how he was remaining so *calm* when they were literally characters in a horror movie. He wasn't shaking, he wasn't breathing heavily, he wasn't even clenching his jaw as he dumped the buckets of meat around the traps, kicking stray pieces so they aligned with the jagged claws. It was half irritating, half relieving. Irritating because she couldn't wrap her mind around his indifference, relieving because it was nice to know that at least *one* of them was level-headed.

Still, she couldn't believe this had been her idea and here she was, breaking down like a boob.

Gosh, what was she, five?

Before they'd even left her house she had been stuck on the toilet with a bout of Nervous Bowel Syndrome. Now she was barely keeping her cool as she followed Hargrove in circles, watching him scatter chunks of raw beef on the crunchy forest floor, eyes darting back and forth in case their monster decided to show. It shouldn't have been *him* handling the situation this well — it should have been *her*. And gosh darn it, instead she was falling apart. It was humiliating. She was appalled at her own terror. Even though she was perfectly justified, given what she'd experienced twice before, she always prided herself on her steadfastness. So where was that magical Randy Courage when she needed it the most? Or at the very least, where was that Randy BS?

"If you pass out, I'm leaving you here," Hargrove said suddenly, and she blinked, noticed him some feet away with an annoyed expression.

Ah, right. Her Courage — or perhaps her BS — had probably been drained from this guy and his evil antics. Exhaustion was a burdensome thing.

"I'm not going to pass out," she snapped, shuffling towards him while peeking once more behind her. "Are you quite finished coating the floor in chum?"

"Hey, I preferred to use you as bait, but you opted out. Not my

problem I had to use beef."

"Har har." She waved the light over his traps. "So what do we do now?"

He began walking again, this time towards an overturned tree. "We wait."

"*There?*"

"You got a better idea, dipshit?"

She cringed. "Not really, but won't it see us here?"

He tossed the bat and his flashlight into the divot beneath the trunk, then slid down the rough slope after them. With the tree and its shadow covering the small ditch, Hargrove was barely visible even with her flashlight pointed at him. She sighed. It might not have been the ideal place to wait out their prey, but she supposed it was the best they were going to get.

A snap of a stick made goosebumps run up her arms and down the back of her neck, and she quickly handed the ax, map, and her flashlight to Hargrove before very nearly throwing herself down into the ditch besides him. The two second burst had her heart racing and her mind jumbled, and she found herself shrinking into her M1 as she huddled as low to the earth as she possibly could.

"Can't believe you talked me into this," Hargrove muttered, sliding down until he was sitting with the shotgun draped in his lap.

"Me too," she managed.

He exhaled and shut her flashlight off, set it down beside her. It was so dark now that she couldn't even see her hand an inch from her face, the vulnerability of not being able to see almost making her groan. She retained it, though, tried to get a hold of herself.

As annoying as it was, Hargrove's calmness was helpful. His breathing was even-keeled, his indifference to the darkness soothing. She copied his inhales and exhales as carefully as she could until her heart rate was back under control, then tried to focus on his

levelheadedness, his lack of fear, to help her own ridiculous bone-quivering terror. Which made her wonder: how *was* he so calm? How was it that being five minutes late to school was more horrifying than sitting in a dark forest waiting for an alien creature to show?

She slid the bat so that it wasn't poking into her spine and then adjusted the M1 in her hands.

"You're awfully calm," she murmured lowly, running her fingers up and down the wooden stock.

"And you're not," he replied as quietly.

"I think that's a given. How can you be so relaxed? You were freaking out ten minutes ago because we were running behind, now it's dark as sin and there's a monster lurking around us, and you're not even flinching."

A beat. Then,

"I've faced a lot worse things than some freak experiment."

Somehow, that answer wasn't surprising. She wasn't 100% certain about his family life, but she heard enough as his neighbor to know that things weren't pretty. And while neither he nor Max had ever said anything definite about their sudden move from California, she had a feeling that whatever had happened out there hadn't been good. For either of them.

Randy tangled with her next words before letting them free.

"You mean like... your dad?"

Hargrove said nothing for a while, and the sounds of night filled his silence. But just as Randy was beginning to mentally kick herself for prying (she *always* seemed to make him mad, it was like some sort of talent), he sighed.

"Yeah, he's a dick," he said shortly.

She'd heard their fights on plenty of occasions. His dad wasn't home often, but when he was, there were times Randy seriously worried

about one or the other's safety. They didn't fight all the time, but on those few bad days she sometimes wondered if fists were involved. Hargrove never came to school with bruises — not that anyone could see, but considering how keen he was to strip for the high school girls, she doubted he had anything to hide on any other part of his body — but she was beginning to wonder if they weren't necessarily the kind of the flesh, but of the mind.

"Going home growing up... it was a living hell," he continued, surprising her. "After my mom abandoned us, my old man just started hating me instead. Nothing I did made him happy. I tried to be what he wanted. Tried to make him proud." He shifted, rocks tumbled around him. "Just a bitter son of a bitch, is what he is. He blames me like it's my fault mom left, but he knows he's the one who pushed her away. Always slapping her around, making her miserable."

"She left you?" Randy asked, appalled. "With your dad?"

"She couldn't take it anymore, I guess. I called her, tried to get her to take me with her..." he trailed, exhaled, then continued more bitterly, "Guess my old man was right. She was too busy playing under the sheets with another man to think of her own kid."

Randy's eyes were beginning to adjust, and she lowered her gaze to the M1 in her icy hands.

"I'm sorry," she said. And she meant it.

Hargrove snorted. "No reason to be. Kids get abandoned by their moms all the time."

All the more reason to be, she almost said, but didn't.

"Is that why you hate Max?" she pressed. "Because of your dad?"

He grunted. "I hate her because she screwed up my already fucked up life the day she came into it. Going home before Max and Susan were around was bad enough, but now that they're here it's just a fucking nightmare. I'm responsible for Max at *all* times, every day. It's like I'm her nanny or some shit. If I even remotely screw up — if Max is just a *little* late for school, or if her homework isn't finished, or if she misses

her hour at the arcade, or if she falls skateboarding, or if she's even *upset* — it's *my fault*. I'm responsible. It's *maddening*. And I hate it. I hate *her*."

Randy had always thought he was just being a jerk big brother when he treated Max poorly. There really was no *reason* to make someone miserable for something they weren't responsible for, of course, but now, at the very least, his distaste for her made sense. It wasn't necessarily *Max* that he hated, it was his dad using Max to *make* him miserable that he hated. The schedule-keeping, the time obsession, the explosive anger over tardiness — it all made sense. He was a control freak because his *dad* was a control freak. Anything he did wrong came back on him, so he was obsessed with making sure Max was right where she needed to be at all times. When he wasn't with Max, he was trying to control what little part of his life his dad didn't, as if to remind himself his dad wasn't king over him — school, women, his car, his looks... It was all just some sad form of retaining a pinch of control.

And she'd practically destroyed *all* of that.

Ugh, she thought, cringing. *And here I thought he deserved a little chaos.*

"Hey, you tell anyone I told you any of this and I swear I'll *kill you*," he hissed, the earlier vulnerability snapping shut like his Camaro's trunk.

Randy's pity melted into annoyance.

"Who am I going to tell? Huh? Nancy?" She tsked and clutched her gun to her chest. "Geez, I'm not some talk show host."

Snap!

Randy froze.

"What was—?"

Another *snap*, this time closer, and her mouth shut firmly. Hargrove was shifting beside her, she could feel him move as he leaned up against the bank as quietly as he could, and she did the same. They pushed themselves up, peered over the ditch towards their little set-

up.

Nothing.

"Where is it?" she nearly mouthed.

"I don't know..." he responded just as quietly. She could hear him lift the shotgun. "C'mon, you son of a bitch.... C'mon..."

Though her eyes were adjusted to the darkness, Randy wanted so badly to kick on her flashlight. To *see* would have been helpful — in the pitch, all she could make out were shapes and shadows. The ground was clear of trees between them and the spot where the traps were laid, so she had a decent enough view of their meat piles, but it was still faint, still crackly like her eyes were some video camera trying to record. It didn't help that the sky was overcast. They had no moon to offer even a sliver of its pale glow, no stars.

The distinct crack of a branch made her lower again in the ditch, but Hargrove stayed put. She slowly lifted herself, peeked over the edge. In the trees, just a few feet past the traps, she could see something move. A shadow. It wasn't tall enough to be human, but it wasn't small enough to be a dog or a coyote. It was definitely four-legged, though.

It gurgled lowly as it shuffled closer, and Randy felt the hairs rise on her arm. She knew that sound.

She leaned in towards Hargrove, practically pressed her lips to his ear as she whispered shakily, "*That's it.*"

She heard him swallow, adjust his grip on the shotgun.

The strange noises followed a snuffling, a careful, tentative step nearer the traps. It was clearly interested in the meat, but it must have sensed something was wrong. Perhaps it wasn't accustomed to an easy meal? Perhaps it could smell them? Or was it simply some kind of animal intuition, or instinct, that made it hesitate? There was an all-you-can-eat buffet just waiting to be laid waste to, and yet the creature was frozen, those strange, other-worldly noises filling the night air.

It was then that Randy noticed the silence. The frogs and crickets had gone mum, the owl had ceased its eerie call. There was no breeze, no rustle of dried leaves. The only sound was the creature, Hargrove's uneven breathing, and her own heartbeat thrumming in her ears. The fog, too, had grown much denser, and it was settling in around the ditch like a picture frame, encircling them beneath their log. All around them the trees cracked and groaned under the weight of the cold night, and Randy became conscious of the wisps escaping her lips as she tried to control her labored breathing. Hargrove, too, had a dense white rolling from his mouth. On a normal day, it wouldn't have made her look twice. But in that very moment, it made her feel sick.

Could the monster see their breath, too?

Could it hear her heart, pounding like a jackhammer? Or her chattering teeth? Or Hargrove's restless jaw?

Why wasn't it eating the meat? Why was it just standing there?

Did it know they were there?

Do something, for the love of bovine! She screamed in her head, anxiety rattling inside her like a pinball.

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds.

The monster took a few steps closer to the traps, and its shadow took on a figure.

Randy stuffed her knuckles into her mouth to stop a noise from escaping it. Of course she'd seen the creature before — the first time, her mind had barely comprehended it before Hargrove had hit it with his car. The second time, they were moving so fast that everything about that night had become a horrific blur, like some kind of fever dream. But seeing it so close, so still... even in the darkness it was her first time *truly* seeing it. And it was horrific.

Hargrove lifted the shotgun to his shoulder, pressed himself into the side of the ditch. He aimed the barrel at the creature as it lumbered to the meat, strange face picking up stray chunks as it moved. Randy

shook as she clenched her M1, incapable of lifting it and aiming. But Hargrove had her covered — his finger was on the trigger, his hand resting on the body of the shotgun as he breathed in and out, in and out, a wobble to his exhales.

The creature shifted so its profile was facing them, carefully lifted a few chunks off the pile, its foot *just* missing the trap, and—

Cha-chunk

In a movie, the sound of a pumping shotgun was always so satisfying. But there, in the silence, in the veil of night, in the bowels of a woods with a faceless monster now staring right in their direction...

Randy felt like it was the sound of her death.

The creature reared, its face split open, and it gave a screech so piercing that Randy's toes curled inside her sneakers.

"Run—" Hargrove barked, jumping to his feet and lifting the shotgun.
"RUN!"

Randy didn't need to be told twice.

She swung the M1 over her shoulder, kicked her flashlight on, and shot out of the ditch.

A *bang* rattled her as she ran, and it took her a second to realize that it had been Hargrove's shotgun going off. Still, she didn't stop. Her flashlight bounced up and down, throwing the forest into a psychedelic frenzy as she jumped over logs and slid past trees. Leaves crunched and brush rustled as she flew through the darkness, lungs burning with the cold air.

Another *bang* brought her to a stop, and she spun around, flashlight swinging.

"Hargrove?" she called hoarsely.

Silence.

She swallowed, shook as she took a few steps back.

Where was he? He should have been behind her. He should have been moving after that first shot—

Oh gosh, what had she *done*?

Why did she run away? Why did she abandon him to that *thing*? It was all her fault that they were out there to begin with, and it would be all her fault if something bad happened to him. The only reason he had agreed to her reckless plan was because he wanted his life to go back to the way it was before everything had happened. He didn't deserve to get eaten!

Well, actually, that was debatable. Given everything he had put her through, becoming monster dinner wasn't necessarily an *unjust* end. Still, she didn't really want a Hargrove ghost haunting her for the rest of her life.

"Hargrove?" she tried again.

No answer.

"Ugh!" she huffed, hiked her M1 up her shoulder, and took off back in the direction she had just come. "I hate this!"

—

Dark trees blurred by as Billy flew through the woods. He'd stupidly left his flashlight at the bottom of the ditch, so his sight was only as good as the night would allow. Still, he wasn't too worried about it. Peters, he knew, had taken hers, and he was *supposed* to catch up with her...

Where the hell was that little shit, anyway?

He came to a halt and looked around, tried to find a distant beam of light. Black outlines and distant shadows of trees gave no sign of Peters. Not a even distant speckle. Unless she was running around with her flashlight switched off, he *should* see the light. The woods weren't overly thick, and with the trees bare of leaves, so he should be able to see a flashlight bouncing around.

Shit, where is she?

"Peters?" he whisper-yelled. "Peters!"

Damn, when he'd told her to run he'd never expected her to just book it out of the whole damn forest!

...Unless she never made it out?

Billy ran a hand through his hair as he spun around in circles, looking for any sign of his neighbor. He'd just shot the freak experiment twice — *twice* — with a shotgun and it had barely flinched from the impact. It seemed that Peters' anxiety was for good reason. The Camaro incident wasn't simply luck on its part, it was literally incapable of being hurt. If a shotgun didn't riddle it with holes, nothing was penetrating its hide. Though he'd managed to clear the area after the second shot, he had no idea where the thing got off to. For all he knew, it could have gotten P—

A scream pierced the night.

"Ah, shit," he breathed, running towards the sound. "Randy!"

18. Hawkins Lab

The traps were still half-full with beef chunks by the time Randy reached the site, and there was no monster to be found. Hargrove had vanished, too.

She shined her flashlight over the dead leaves, looking for any sign of tracks, blood, dragging... *anything*. But as she frantically waved the beam of light over the ground, she remembered Barbara. Her disappearance had been clean, devoid of evidence. There had been no blood, drag marks, not a leaf out of place. Even the Hawkins police had been at a loss. If hadn't been for Nancy's animal theory, they would have had nothing to go on. And if that was so, what if something happened to Hargrove and she could never find him? What if the *thing* got him, too, and he just disappeared without a trace?

A *snap* made her turn, illuminating the trees behind her.

"Hargrove?" she whispered.

Dust danced in the beam. More twigs snapped as something moved beyond the light's reach.

Though she could see nothing, the hairs on the back of her neck were pin-straight. Whatever was out there, it could certainly see *her*. And she had a terrible feeling it wasn't Hargrove.

She exhaled shakily, clenched her fist.

"Alright," she managed, nodded, and then slid the M1 from her shoulder. "Alright."

She stuck the flashlight in her mouth, pointed it in the direction of the movement, then lifted the butt of the gun and pressed it into her shoulder. Even though it had spent years bouncing between the hallway closet and under her parents' bed, and even though she'd seen her dad clean it only a dozen times over the years, she'd never actually *shot* it. Held it, sure. Asked her grandpa war stories about it, yeah. But shot it? No way. Still, she owed it to Hargrove, to Barbara,

and even to her deceased grandfather to put a bullet (or two) in that nasty lab experiment that her parents had probably had a hand in creating.

She was sick of shaking, sick of hyperventilating every time it came around. It was time she put on her Big Girl Pants, shot the darn gun, and put her and Hargrove's lives back in order.

Of course, that was all easier said than done. As soon as she got a glimpse of that leathery skin, her knees began to quake beneath her. It took every ounce of courage to stand her ground, and as the creature moved its way into the spotlight, that nasty gurgle rippling the air between them, Randy crushed her left eyes closed and—

Squeezed the trigger.

Unlike a shotgun, which needed to be pumped to reload, an M1 didn't need to be reloaded, not until its magazine ran empty. And for Randy who no idea how to shoot the thing, the burst of bullets that tore the ground up around the creature's feet startled her. A few stray, not-so aimed bullets collided with its body, but they only seemed to make it make grouchier. It didn't seem to matter how much lead smacked into it, the creature barely flinched as it continued to close in on her. And without warning, the stream of fire stopped as her ammunition came to an end.

"This is bad," she squeaked, lowering the weapon.

The creature's face split open. It lunged at her.

Randy screamed as the body slammed her into the forest floor, knocking the wind out of her and smacking her head against the cold ground.

She choked, tried to blink away the stars as a putrid smell invaded her nose. Sharp claws dug into her arms and glimpses of teeth between the black specks made the throbbing of her heart echo in her head. She wanted to scream, to fight, but her mind felt sluggish, her body detached from her commands.

"—ndy!" a voice broke through the pounding in her ears. Then, more

clearly, "Randy!"

Billy cursed. His lungs felt like they were on fire, his legs like jelly. Sure, he was a work-out fiend — but he was a *lifter*, not a *runner*. His body wasn't accustomed to sprinting, and especially not for such long distances. If it wasn't for the adrenaline pumping through him like some sort of deranged drug, he wouldn't have made it as far as he did. But with a carnivorous lab experiment chasing him and the possibility of his annoying — yet strangely attachable, like tape, or glue — neighbor in danger, he had a few incentives to keep his weak-ass legs moving. Mostly: not dying.

Without a flashlight, though, it was aggravating to move through the woods. Sharp branches kept grabbing at him, logs appeared out of nowhere, roots were out to snap his ankles, and webs (somehow even in the dead of Fall) wrapped around his face. He sputtered and swatted his arms, hurdled over objects, zig-zagged past trees as he panted and choked.

There was still no sign of Peters. If she hadn't screamed, he would have thought she'd cleared the forest by now. No lights flashing through the trees, no sound of breathing but his own, not even the crashing of leaves under feet. He sounded like a drunk elephant, he couldn't even begin to imagine what *she* sounded like, tripping and flailing in her terrified grace. Despite the silence, though, he knew she was out there somewhere. As much of a pain in the ass as she was, and for as much trouble she had put through these last few days, something in his gut told him she wasn't the kind of person that would just leave him behind. He hated to admit anything good about her (she was a complete dipshit, and if it wasn't for her he wouldn't even *be* in the situation that he was in), but no matter what her faults, she was, at the very least, stupidly loyal.

Some people saw loyalty as a virtue. For Billy, who'd never had anyone loyal to him — and no reason to be loyal to anyone else — saw it as a fault. Loyalty was just the blind leading the blind. When they tripped and fell, the one following got hurt, too. Peters was the perfect example. He saw the way she stuck to Wheeler like some lost puppy. Wheeler wasn't a receptive person; he didn't need to *know* her

to see that about her. It was obvious. It was like she was in the room but wasn't — checked out, somehow. But Peters always hung around, even when she was dragged to parties and forced to ride home with her neighbor who hated her guts. Even though she spent most lunches alone, walked to and from school every day, and rarely left her house.

Not that Billy cared, of course. If that's how Peters chose to live, then that's how she chose to live. He just thought it was stupid. She was wasting her already lame youth for a friend who wasn't a friend. It was pitiful, really. Still, he was a tad thankful for that "stupidly loyal" trait now that he was wandering in a dark forest with a crazed experiment trying to eat him. Maybe that's why he was frying his lungs with cold air and running *towards* the creature — because he was a little — just a little — thankful.

When he reached their rigged clearing, he realized why he hadn't see the light bouncing around the trees: it was haphazardly lying on the ground, its beam blocked by leaves and branches. Enough light poked out to illuminate two figures, and Billy swore.

"Randy!" he yelled, looking around for something — *anything* — to use as a weapon. He'd been forced to abandon the shotgun when he was being chased, now he wished he hadn't. "Shit— Randy, hold on!"

He slid down into their ditch, felt around. His hands bumped into the smooth handle of the baseball bat, and he quickly grabbed it.

Swinging it in the air, he stormed up to the creature pinning Peters to the earth, raised the bat high, and—"

"Go to hell, you son of a bitch!"

It wasn't a bullet and it wasn't a car, and he knew it wasn't going to do much damage, but the force of his swing was at least enough to shove its weight off Peters, who was gasping and shaking and clawing at the air. Billy didn't give it a second to collect its wits — he jogged up to its flailing body and gave it another good blast, this time with every ounce of strength he had in him. The creature rolled a few feet, squealing and flailing, and Billy ran back over to Peters, grappled at her coat.

"Billy!" she gasped, and in the dim glow of the flashlight he could see her cheeks were soaked.

"We gotta get out of here," he barked, heaving her to her feet.

She swayed and stumbled as he tried to pull her alongside him.

"C'mon, *c'mon!*" he hissed.

Randy's head was pounding and her legs felt like lead, but she forced herself to run. The night air was like shards of ice against her skin, stinging her cheeks and filling her lungs with needles. The cold, the exhaustion, the throbbing of her skull made her want to curl into a ball and squeeze her eyes shut against everything, but knowing that that *thing* was just feet behind them, that it had almost got her just like it got Barb, was enough to keep her tired body moving. That, and Hargrove had her hand in a vice-like grip, forcing her sloppy legs to match his speed.

Thankfully, each step she took was more stable than the last. The air was unpleasant in her lungs and against her eyes, but it at least helped to clear the fog from her head. For a moment, when she had been pinned beneath the creature, she had lost all sense of herself. She'd hit her head plenty of times before — she was accident prone, what could she say? — but she had never experienced anything like *that* before. It had been terrifying. If Hargrove hadn't shown up when he did, she certainly would have been à la Human Tartare.

"Where—" she panted, "are we going?"

"Hell should I know?" he managed to squeeze out.

Well, that was comforting. Her head was a disaster, her body ready to crawl into a grave, and they had no idea where they were.

"The map!" she gasped.

Using her free hand, she shakily dug into her pocket, pulled out the wrinkled but in tact map. But before she could wave it open, Hargrove came to a sudden stop. She ran face-first into his back with

an "ooph!", then stumbled backwards as he released her hand.

"Aw shit," he wheezed.

A six-foot tall chain-link fence stood in front of them, barbed wire running along the top. On the other side were more trees and brush, but as Randy glanced around she took in the well-worn path beneath their feet, the tire tracks marking a seemingly endless road along the fence line.

"Shit," Hargrove muttered again, slamming his hands against the barrier. "Shit, shit, shit, shit, *shit!*"

He shoved away from it, ran a hand down his face, then doubled over and rested his palms against his knees as he took in thick, labored breaths.

Randy said nothing as she took the flashlight from him and unsteadily opened the map. She set the beam against the paper, searched around the wooded area they had set the traps, then tried to calculate where it was they had ended up.

"The lab," she breathed, shaking her head. She lifted the flashlight to the fence. "This must be the lab."

"Yeah, no shit," he growled, pushing himself back up and throwing a hand at a yellow sign.

***RESTRICTED AREA
NO TRESPASSING
U.S. GOVERNMENT
PROPERTY***

Randy rolled her eyes and glanced behind them. No sign of the creature yet, but that didn't mean it wasn't on its way. Or already watching them, waiting to lunge.

"So what do we do now?" she asked, shoving the map back into her pocket. "We have nowhere to go, and that *thing* is waiting for some takeout."

"Hey, it's not *my* fault we ended up here," he snapped. "I was too busy

saving *your ass* to figure out how to get back to the car. I could have just left you there."

She said nothing to that. He *could* have left her there, and she would be lying if she said she wasn't surprised that he hadn't. How many times had he threatened to turn her into monster food? And yet there she was: undigested. For now.

Hargrove began to rifle through his pockets, first his jeans and then his leather jacket. He grunted in aggravation when he came out empty handed, but in the last pocket "bingo'ed" when he procured a thick pocket knife.

"I'm such a dumbass," he said, but his eyes were wide as he began to pull out different tools from the handle.

"What *is* that?" Randy asked.

"A Leatherman."

"A what?"

"Our ticket through that fence, now shut up so I can think."

Randy grumbled but kept quiet as he began to work his way through the tools. When he seemed to find what he was looking for, he moved towards the fence and began to work his way through the chain.

Randy kept an eye on the woods behind them, shivering in the cold. The sound of metal snapping echoed up and down the path as Hargrove clipped the links. The trees creaked and groaned in the night. A steady fog began to roll in, looking a lot like their trap site had when the creature made its appearance.

Actually, when she stopped to think about it, a dense fog had come out of nowhere that night she was walking home *and* on Halloween when Hargrove had been driving, too. And now here it was again...

"Hey, Hargrove?" Randy asked, shifting closer to him. "I think this fog is a bad sign..."

"Keep your head on, dipshit," he grunted, snipping more wire.

"Almost done here."

A gurgle came from the trees.

"Um, no, I don't think you understand," she said unsteadily. "This thing doesn't just hunt in fog — it *causes* it."

Brush rustled, and Randy watched as the faceless nightmare inched through the trees.

"I'm working as fast as I can!" Hargrove snapped, the fence rattling as he began to shove at it.

"Yeah, well, *not* fast enough."

That strange, hair-raising purr slid through the air, freezing Randy's heart.

"Seriously, Fabio," she murmured hoarsely, backing closer to the fence. "Hurry. Up."

More snipping, a nasty cuss word.

"It's *right there*," she whispered.

The fog grew in density, the creature paused.

Then its face burst open with a scream.

Randy threw herself into Hargrove who shoved the fence back, grabbed her arm, and pulled her through the small entrance behind him. Jagged metal dug at her coat and snagged her hair as she crawled through the opening and to the other side. Once she was safely through, she slammed her feet against their makeshift door, closing the opening.

They scrambled to their feet, watched the creature from behind the new border, and waited for its next move. But even though it should have been able to push its way through the hole they had made with relative ease, it made no move to pursue them. Instead, it skulked in the shadows of the trees, those strange noises filling the air as it paced behind the brush.

"It's not chasing us," Randy stated.

"No shit, Sherlock."

Hargrove backed away from the fence.

"Why isn't it chasing us?" she demanded.

"Holy shit, does it *matter*? Let's get the hell out of here before it realizes it *can*."

Randy glanced behind them, flashlight beam following her gaze. Despite the sign on the fence, all she could see were trees, trees, and more trees. If they really *were* on the lab's land, the building was too far back for any accidental intruder to see. Then again, no one would just *accidentally* waltz through a barbed wire fence with a giant yellow sign screaming for them to KEEP OUT. She had a feeling that the government didn't want anyone, accidental or otherwise, stumbling across their secret facility. They probably had a heck of a walk to get to the building.

"Maybe there's something here it doesn't like..." she murmured, following the stiff-backed Hargrove through the brush. "Something it's afraid of?"

"Yeah, well, as long as it's not gonna eat us, I think I can handle it," he muttered bitterly, swatting at a branch.

She was almost inclined to agree, but if it really *was* federal property they were traipsing on, there might be a whole lot more to fear than their leathery friend on the other side of the road.

"How far back do you think the lab is?" she asked, trying to see through the trees.

"You've got the map, dipshit."

"Oh." She paused, dug into her pocket and pulled out the crinkled paper. She unfolded it, scanned the area they were walking through. "I'm guessing we ran this way," she said, dragging a finger across the map. "Here's the fence line, I think."

The square boarder they had guessed to be the building she was now quite certain was the fence. It was too big to be the lab, and she didn't think that the government would appreciate the building being plastered all over Hawkins' maps. The fence would be enough to deter any normal person from trespassing, so probably unnecessary to hide its existence.

"And the building?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Can't say. It's not on here."

"Go figure," he grumbled.

Leaves crunched beneath their feet and twigs popped and snapped. The trees groaned in the silence, dropping debris from their limbs that echoed through the cold night air. The frogs and crickets had long since given up their song, and the owl was far behind them. It seemed the only stirring in the woods was their own uneasy movements as they plowed through brush and low overgrowth.

Where they were going exactly, Randy couldn't say. Hargrove was walking and she was following, too tired and shaken to argue. If it was the lab they were going to run into, then so be it. Maybe they could tell those stupid scientists (her parents included) that their freak experiment was roaming the town, ready to cause another Barbara incident. But if it wasn't the lab, then she was fresh out of ideas. Maybe he was planning on roaming the fence line all night until the sun finally rose? At least then they could go back the way they came without having to worry about winding up as monster chow. Or maybe he knew something she didn't?

She watched him walk, twisted her mouth.

Nah, she decided. He's as clueless as I am. He's just not going to admit it.

Still, when she thought back on it, their eventful night had shown her a small side of him that she had never seen before. A raw — dare she say it?— *caring* side, considering he'd come back to help her, beat a giant lizard with a bat, and then saved her dizzy butt from certain death. He had no obligation to. In fact, if they were both being honest, her end would have been his first class ticket back to a semi

normal existence. Even so, he came back for her. And she was more than thankful to know he had a human side to him.

"So you're parents..." He trailed, paused. "They work for the lab?"

Randy sighed. "Unfortunately."

"And they never said anything about this thing?"

"Nothing more than what I told you this morning." Suddenly, a lead weight dropped into her stomach. "Not even when Barb disappeared."

She'd never considered it before, but her friend's disappearance had been, in part, *her parents'* fault. The worst part was that they hadn't even seemed guilty about it. Even though she'd cried and worried endlessly about Barb's safety, they had just patted her on the back like it was all going to be okay. But they knew — they *knew* — it wasn't. A high school student had been taken by a monster that *they* had helped create, and they had barely batted an eye.

"Hey, you alive?"

Randy blinked and looked up. She hadn't even realized she had stopped walking in her sudden cloud of thoughts. Hargrove was looking at her, expression as impassive as ever, but the small tilt of his head let her know that he genuinely meant the question.

"Yeah," she lied, and resumed her pace.

He fell in step beside her.

"Are they ever home?"

She didn't need to ask to know he meant her parents.

She inhaled.

"No. Not anymore, anyway." She looked down at her feet as she stepped over a mossy rock. "Before Barb they worked like normal people: nine to five, home for dinner, home for weekends and holidays... But since all that happened, it seems like they *live* at the lab. It wasn't so bad at first. They worked overtime and sometimes

they would stay the night, but they still spent a lot of time at home. Then slowly things got worse. They stopped coming home for days at a time, and when they did it seemed like they were always on edge, always ready to leave if they had to. And now? Now I'm lucky if I see them once a week. To make up for it they try to call every so often, make sure I'm not *too* lonely, but even then they're detached."

For a while, neither of them spoke. It was just the sound of their walking and the woods around them, their white breath filling the space between them. And what could be said? His home life sucked and hers was nonexistent. He lived beaten down by his dad and she had no parents at all. He probably wished he had her problem over his.

Of course, bad home lives or not, they were still the complete opposite. He let his situation mangle him into a bitter critter and a controlling jerk, but she refused to let hers do the same. She tried to keep her pep. She fought to keep her grades high and always tried to be the encouraging friend that Nancy and Ally needed. She tried not to complain, tried take everything for what it was. Ever since her parents' absence had begun to take its toll, she had made up her mind to not let it change her. Now, seeing how Hargrove acted, she was more resolute than ever.

His bad attitude, though it had its reasons, couldn't always explain away why he did what he did, though. Like his strange vehemence towards Max's classmate. She'd been struggling to get that off her mind all night. The monster had given her a hand with that, but now, wandering with nothing else to think about, it was itching again.

She peered sideways at him. A locked jaw and a stony expression were dead giveaways to the anxiety coursing through him — two tell-tale signs she'd picked up in the course of their "acquaintanceship". He'd never admit it out loud, but he was worried. And for good reason. Still, it was annoying that they had just been chased down by a monster and yet he was still walking with that obnoxious swagger. Could nothing derail his arrogance?

"If you don't stop staring, I'm going to start to worry that you find me attractive."

Randy scoffed but quickly looked away. "I wasn't *staring*. I was *thinking*."

"At me?"

"*About* you, stupid."

"Now I'm *really* worried."

Ugh, how did it come down to this, anyway? Seriously — *her* and *him*? It was pure comedy. If they hadn't almost died just a few minutes ago, she would be looking for cameras and seriously questioning if they had been rolled for some stupid romantic comedy. Only there wasn't any romance. And no one was laughing.

"I'm just trying to figure you out, is all," she muttered, pulling her jacket tighter to keep warm.

"Therapy sessions with Shrink Peters."

"You know, I wouldn't *have* to try and understand you if you didn't try to avoid serious conversations through overall jerk-off-behavior all the time."

He scoffed. "Bullshit."

"You just did it," she pointed out.

"Why the hell do you care, anyway?" he snapped.

"I *don't*. I'm just stuck with you, so I thought I'd at least *try* to get to know you. But apparently you're too much of an egocentric—"

Randy broke off and stopped walking. Hargrove did too, and they both stared as the sudden spotlight flooding the forest floor. She could make out a lamppost through the brush, tall, thick, and very un-tree like. After wandering around in the woods for what felt like hours, any bit of civilization seemed to stick out like a sore thumb.

"I think we found your lab," Hargrove muttered.

They both crept forward, as if the trees would suddenly screech in

alarm at their trespassing. They went no further than the safety of the shadows, but through the branches and shrubbery Randy could make out the side of a large building.

"Well," she murmured lowly, "It's certainly *big*. No wonder they hide it in the middle of the woods."

"And you don't think that's weird?"

"What?"

"That they're trying to hide it, idiot."

"Of course I do! *Everything* about this place is weird."

They stared in awe at its immensity, took in the sharp edges and cold exterior, the flashing lights and satellites that littered it. In the chilly night air and the leafless trees surrounding it, it certainly looked the part of dangerous government facility. Randy wondered in detached curiosity what it was they *did* in there. Even after all these years of her parents working there, she still had no idea what the place was actually used for.

"I can't believe this shit exists," Hargrove muttered from beside her.

"Tell me about it," she said, equally as mystified and still trying to imagine her parents as Igors.

"No, I mean this is full-on *movie* shit," he insisted.

"Yeah, I get it. It's crazy."

"And your parents *work* here."

"Have we not clarified this?"

The lights were so bright they hummed as they passed beneath them, and Hargrove slapped a moth away from his face. Venturing so close to the building was probably a stupid idea, but considering it was well past the 9 to 5 and most of the lights were off inside, she doubted there were many people around to see them. Besides, it's not like they were trying to get *inside*...

Randy paused, took in the small, metal door in front of them.

"What are the odds of us getting in there?" she blurted.

Hargrove snapped his gaze to her.

"Are you serious?"

She faltered, then gave a snort. "Nooo... Of course not! I'm not *that* crazy, geez."

She chortled to herself. Hargrove continued to watch her. After a minute of this, he turned back to the door in front of them.

"What do you think we'll find in there?" he asked.

Now it was Randy's turn to stare.

"Wait, are you *actually* considering this?"

He gave a moody exhale. "Well, we have no other leads, now do we, dipshit? Tonight was a total waste of time and now we get to go back home and sit on our asses and try to pretend like everything is normal. So yes, I *am* considering this."

Randy watched as he stormed up to the door and gave it a yank. Unsurprisingly, it didn't budge.

"Did you really expect it to be unlocked?" she asked with a brow rose.

"No," he snapped, glowering at her. "But it was better than standing around like an idiot."

"Yeah, but you just made yourself look like an idiot trying to open it."

If looks could kill, she'd be dead. Thankfully for her, Hargrove had not yet acquired the ability to burn people with his mind.

Something banged on the other side of the door, and the two of them looked around them in alarm. Spotting a thicket of shrubbery, they threw themselves into its cover, cursing at the bristles and shoving each other out of the way. The door clicked and they held their

breath.

Through the cracks in the brush, Randy could make out the door as it swung open. Two men stepped out from behind it, muttering and grumbling, and she watched as they fumbled in their jackets for cigarettes.

"—I'm just saying, last year was bad enough," the one was saying. "And now that we have things a little more under control, it'd be nice to have a few days off."

"No one has *anything* under control," the other retorted, flicking his lighter to life. He puffed on his cigarette, snapped the Zippo shut. "Everything's a fucking mess. I looked into transferring."

"How'd that go?"

"Disaster. Trust me: no one's leaving this place. Not after everything we've seen. There's just no way the gov's gonna risk that kind of secret getting out."

Randy twisted just enough to get a better view of the first voice, something was eerily familiar about it...

"Yeah, well, I've got a kid at home," it was saying, "and I could use some time off like a normal person. I'm beginning to forget her age."

Dad.

She pressed her hand into her mouth and gave Hargrove a pained look. He seemed to understand, pressed a finger to his lips to insist she stayed silent.

"My wife's ready to lose it, too," he continued, taking a drag.

"At least the pay's good," the second man said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Even if we can't spend it."

Her dad snorted, shook his head. After another few puffs they flicked their cigarette butts and turned back towards the door. She watched her dad slide a card through a small panel, the door beeped, and they threw it open.

They disappeared back into the building, but before the door could hit its latch Randy busted through the shrubs, jammed her fingers between the door and the doorway, stopping it just before it could lock. It was an entirely spur-of-the-moment action, and she sat there, biting her lip against the pain in her hand, head swirling with the notion that her dad *knew something*, that he was in cahoots with the facility.

And she was going to get some answers.

Hargrove slid out of the bush and stared at her like she had lost her mind.

"Well?" she whispered, motioning to the door. "Is the egocentric ready for some amoral criminal activity?"

He looked from her to the door. He sighed.

"I really hate you, you know that?" he grumbled.

19. The Field of Death

Oh, how the tables had turned.

Last Billy checked, it was *his* job to lure the innocent into destructive habits and criminal mishaps, not Peters. Yet there he was: following a barely five-foot, frizzy ball of unexpected corruption into a highly illegal — not to mention extremely *stupid* — situation that he otherwise would never have stepped into. It was fucked up but he had to give her credit: it wasn't every day he was persuaded to do something reckless that he hadn't thought up himself.

As much as he hated to admit it — and as big of a pain in the ass as she was — Peters was beginning to grow on him. Just a little. She screwed up his already screwed up life and almost got him killed, yes, but the cow country that was Hawkins, Indiana certainly wasn't as boring as he had thought it was going to be. And though it did disturb him, she was the only one who seemed to give a shit about anything other than the shallow existence that was high school.

Still, all of her "OK" qualities couldn't exactly make up for their current shit-show.

Sure, Billy had broken into places before. He'd stolen stuff, gotten into hundreds of fights, drank as a minor, and vandalized uncountable amounts of shit. But that nothing compared to creeping through a government-run lab, looking for answers to an escaped monster experiment. It was like waltzing through an empty hospital — the smell of chemicals burned his nose, the glaring white of the linoleum and the harsh buzz of the fluorescents made his head hurt. It reminded him of the time he and his dad had taken things a step too far, when it wasn't just bruises and split lips that their tussle left behind.

He hadn't walked into a hospital since.

Maybe that was why sweat was dripping down his temples and soaking through his shirt — everything around him seemed so bright, so freakishly sanitary, it was like being back in the hospital, waiting for the doctor to tell him that his arm was broken and and his ribs

bruised, waiting for the nurses to question how it had happened, waiting to lie through his teeth that he'd gotten into a fight with some boys at school, pretending that his dad wasn't standing menacingly behind him.

"You think these are offices?" Peters asked suddenly, stopping in front of one of the doors that lined the hallway and rattling its knob. Its plastic number read 152.

"Beats me," he mumbled, glancing at the others around them.

When the knob refused to budge, she crouched down and pressed her cheek to the floor to try and peer underneath. "Or do you think they're, like, doors to secret rooms?"

This girl's stupidity was failing to surprise him anymore.

She probably thought they would open to some stupid space realm or magical world, like in those weird books she'd had stacked on a shelf in her living room. What were they called, again? Narby? Narminy? Narniny? Whatever the hell they were, he remembered Max going through some weird phase where she read them (something about a closet — maybe a lion? — and a witch), and he'd tried to flush them down the toilet just to piss her off.

"Oh, it's *definitely* a secret door to Narniny," he said with sarcastic excitement. "Maybe if you run into it enough, it'll open for you."

"Har har. Good one, Fabio, but that's—" She paused, tilted her head to the side, then glanced up at him. "Wait. What is a... a Narniny?"

"Hell if I should know," he muttered, picking a leaf out of his hair, "It's one of your geek books."

"Um, no. It's not. I've never heard of that. Ever."

He snorted. "I saw it in your living room, dipshit. No point in trying to lie."

She squinted at him as if he was speaking another language as she asked, "Hold on, do you mean... *Narnia*?"

Oh. That's what it was. Narnia. Right.

"Narniny, Narnia — tomayto, tomahto — what difference does it make?"

"Everything, you idiot."

"Sorry, I have a life and don't waste my time reading geek books."

"I'll have you know that *The Chronicles of Narnia* is *not* for geeks! They're class—"

A bang from somewhere down the hall made them jump, and Peters snapped her mouth shut. The distant sound of footsteps and voices followed, and Billy realized with a sudden wave of nausea that they had company.

"You don't suppose you could whip up some of that Narniny shit now, do you?" he whispered.

"*Nar-ni-A!*" she hissed, cheeks crimson. "And what do you think I am? A wizard? I can't just fart a door open!"

"Yeah, well, you sure can fart open a helluva lot of trouble!"

They scanned the hallway around them, looking for a nook, a closet — *anything* — to hide in, but there was nothing but doors, white linoleum, and those incessantly buzzing fluorescent lights. There wasn't even a fire exit. Wasn't it the damn law to have one in every hallway?

"We're trapped," Peters whispered hoarsely.

"Get a hold of yourself," Billy snapped, grabbing the closet doorknob and giving it a twist. Locked. "Shit— try as many as you can. There's gotta be *one* that's not locked."

"Right," she managed, and began to try as many doors as she could.

Billy prayed that at least *one* would open. There was no way that every single of them was locked — surely there had to be a bathroom or lobby or *something* that they left open, right? But every knob he

grabbed refused to budge, and he began to question just *what* they had inside those rooms that was so damn important.

The voices grew in volume as the distance between them and the lab workers disappeared. Peters was now frantically flying from door to door, looking as panicked as Billy felt. Time was running out. If they didn't find somewhere to toss themselves within the next ten seconds, they were going to be in some serious shit.

He was about ready to abort the whole damn plan and sprint back out the door they had originally came through when Peters gave a triumphant "aha!"

"Here!" she whispered-yelled, throwing an unnumbered door open and waving him over.

Billy didn't need to be told twice. He slid towards her, grabbed her arm, and pulled her inside with so much force she slammed into him. He closed the door as quickly and quietly as he could, then backed the both of them as far away from it as the small space would allow, stopping only when his back bumped into what felt like a shelf.

It wasn't a second too soon.

Shadows passed underneath the door, and he made out the words, "...data set is *all* over the board. I seriously have *no* idea what we're working with here..."

It smelled more strongly of chemicals in here than it had in the hallway, and Billy fought the urge to groan at the overwhelming stench. Peters, a little too close for comfort, pressed herself into him as another shadow peeked beneath the door.

"This thing makes no sense..." its voice said, trailing off as another added, "...can't keep up, it's...."

The workers' speech drifted off until it the hallway was silent again. He and Peters stood frozen, squished against one another like some sick twist on 7 Minutes in Heaven, waiting to see if the men would come back through. He could hear her shaky breathing in the quiet, and he peeked down at her, caught a glimpse of her brown eyes in

the light poking through the door frame. Without warning, his heart began to pound.

When all remained silent, she cracked open the door and peered out, bathing the closet in the harsh glow of the fluorescents and giving Billy a clear look at the bottles of Pine-Sol stacked around them.

"I think it's clear," she whispered.

His heart was practically in his throat as he snapped, "Good, let's get the hell out of here before I pass out."

He shoved past her and into the hallway, took a deep breath of the semi-fresh air as she attempted to shake off the strange sensation he had just experienced.

It's just the Pine-Sol, he told himself. *Just the Pine-Sol. Calm the hell down.*

But he was finding it unnecessarily difficult to block out the very persistent image of her brown eyes.

"What do you think they were talking about?" she asked, peering down the hall where the workers must have disappeared.

"How should I know?" he muttered, raking a hand through his hair and trying to get a hold of himself. "You're the one with the parents that work here."

"Yeah, but it's not like they talk about work at *home*," she retorted, sounding annoyed. She paused. "He said something about data being all over the place — you think they're testing something?"

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Like maybe our leathery friend?"

"It *better* be."

If the lab was cooking up invincible lizards in its spare time, he hated to think of the other crazy shit they could have locked behind those doors.

They continued down the long hallway, but this time they stayed on high alert. Neither of them were keen on another closet-run, Billy especially. Pine-Sol, apparently, made him think *really* weird things.

The further and further they pushed into the building, however, the more uneasy Billy became. Not because trespassing was illegal or some whiny, goody-two-shoes shit; but because the feds had tricks up their sleeves that even *he* knew he couldn't imagine. Cameras, microphones, motion sensors — all that crazy technology they always used in the movies. Hell, the lab workers could already know that they were in the building, and there was definitely no bullshitting their way out if they got caught.

"Seriously though," Peters continued in a hushed tone, "What do you think they were on about?"

Billy exhaled in annoyance. "I have a feeling we don't want to know."

"Do you really think it has to do with the loose experiment?" she pressed.

"Hell, I'm beginning doubt they even realize their freak pet is *missing*."

The idea that a giant man-eating lizard was running rampant with no one seeming to be concerned about it was pretty fucked up. If the government was so keen on keeping their creepy test-site a secret, why would they let a carnivorous, four-legged monster run loose? It just didn't make sense. No, the more likely — and quite frankly sickening — option was that they had no idea it was roaming free.

They turned left into another long hallway. There were two more branching off of this one: the one on the right leading to what looked like more office space, and the one on the left disappearing around a corner. Straight ahead was a dead-end with a single, metal door. It looked the one they had sneaked through outside — same shape and size, an identical card-reading padlock on the wall beside it.

"Bingo," Billy said, staring at the barrier.

Peters gave the handle a tug, but like all the others, it didn't move.

"Geez, do they lock *every* door in this place?" she exclaimed in a

hushed tone.

Billy put his hand on the cool surface, then slowly pressed his ear against it. Through the metal, he could hear machines, bangs, and what sounded like muffled voices. It was a definite change from the all the dark, silent doors they had passed in the previous hallway.

"Hear anything?" she asked.

"Sounds like machines," he answered, frowning. "But there's people behind there, too. Even if we get through, we'll be in for it."

He backed away from the door and scanned the hallway to their left. They could keep going and hope they find *something* to prove that the lab was involved with the monster, but if the whole building was locked up like these last two hallways, they weren't going to get very far. Their best option was probably to—

Suddenly, he froze. His blood ran cold.

"Ah, shit."

"What? What is it?" Peters demanded hoarsely, pushing away from the door.

He slowly lifted a finger, pointed at the ceiling.

He was staring directly into a camera.

—

Randy swallowed when her eyes met the glaring lens.

Of course, there would be cameras — they were waltzing through a government-run lab, for Pete's sake. Why hadn't she thought of that sooner? How many of them had they passed without even realizing it? Gosh, this was like a bad dream.

"Well, if they didn't know who we were before, they definitely do now," she muttered with false cheer. "We gave them a good ol' look at our faces. Maybe we should wave, too."

"No, we need to leave," Hargrove stated, backing away.

"Best idea you've had yet," she agreed, giving the camera a Vulcan salute.

They turned to run back the way they had came, but a sudden onslaught of muffled voices made them glance back towards the door in stupefied alarm.

Beep!

"...telling you what I saw! There are two kid—"

The metal door swung open, and the two lab workers on the other side froze at the sight of her and Hargrove, stock still in the middle of the hallway, gaping like two kids caught with their hands in a cookie jar.

For moment, there was only dumb silence. The four of them stared at each other in silence with their mouths hanging open, Randy and Hargrove in horror, the lab workers in disbelief. Though Randy wasn't sure what horrified her the most: the fact they had just gotten caught, or that it was her *mom* in the lab coat.

"R-Randy?" her mom stammered, face pale, hands barely retaining their grip on her clipboard.

Randy swallowed the lump in her throat. "Uh, hey, mom..."

She felt Hargrove's prickling stare before he grabbed her arm and hissed, "Nice reunion, but we need to go... *NOW*."

She offered her mom one last look before allowing him to drag her down the hall. If he was disturbed by the fact that they had just seen her mom, he didn't say anything. And she had never felt more thankful for him than she did in that moment.

As they ran, everything felt much further away than she remembered it being. It seemed to take them twice as long to reach the corner than it had when they were first walking through, and this time they were sprinting. She hurdled herself around the bend behind Hargrove, but the floor was much more slippery than she recalled.

Though her upper body was going straight, she quickly discovered that her feet, still sliding sideways, had other ideas.

"Ooh—!" she squeaked, colliding with the harsh linoleum.

It rattled her enough that she tasted the harsh metallic of blood. Thankfully, Hargrove wasn't going to leave her there. He growled, nearly slipped himself, but snagged her hand.

"How many times, Peters?" he wheezed, tugging her back upright and then towing her behind him. "*How many times?*"

At this point, she honestly couldn't remember. Was it the third time he'd saved her? Fourth? Maybe it was the sixth? Whatever it was, her body was sick of running and her brain was sick of thinking. Her tongue stung, legs ached, her feet throbbed, and her lungs felt like they were ready to give out on her. She was supposed to be home, cozied up in pajamas, working on Chemistry homework or enjoying a lighthearted movie. But instead she was running from government workers — including her own mother — inside a high-security lab that they were definitely not supposed to be in.

Thank goodness Hargrove's hand was like a vice. Even if she wanted to stop, he wasn't going to let that happen.

After what felt like miles, the metal door to the outside world came into view. Randy almost cried in joy. A few more steps, and they would be home free. But suddenly, one of the many numbered — and supposedly *locked* — doors flew open. Hargrove came a skittering stop, narrowly avoiding a face-first greeting with it, forcing Randy to bump into him from behind. The force of her collision shoved him forward just far enough to make the workers, who were stepping into the hall, yell out in surprise. Randy recognized one of them instantly as her dad, and she gave him a nervous smile.

"Hey, dad...."

Yells from behind made her glance over her shoulder, and Hargrove, looking very much like he was over the whole situation, yelled something obscene, waved his free arm frantically, and barreled through her dad and his coworkers with Randy screeching like a

pterodactyl from behind.

Bye dad—" she managed as they plowed past.

She was so grounded.

Finally, their escape was in reach. They both slammed into the metal door, threw it open, and stumbled onto the dewy grass.

"Trees! Trees! Trees!" Hargrove chanted, sprinting over the slick grass, beneath the humming spotlights, and towards the dark hedgerow they had originally emerged, with her in tow.

Thorns raked against her jeans, gnarled tree limbs snagged at her hair, and stubborn leaves slapped her face as Hargrove pulled her carelessly through the shadows. Over the crashing of feet and their ragged breathing she could hear the voices of the lab workers behind them, the beams from their flashlights bouncing around in the dark.

They didn't stop running until they were tucked deep into the shadows. They could still hear the workers far behind them, but in the thick, dark foliage they were safe for at least a moment. It was enough of a comfort to finally let their bodies and searing lungs rest, and they collapsed in a heap.

Randy dragged herself behind a large bush as she gasped for air, wincing at the pain shooting through her legs, the cramp in her side, and the erratic pounding of her heart.

"Sonofa—bitch!" Hargrove wheezed beside her, clutching his stomach.

She wasn't usually one to condone foul language, but in this case, she was inclined to agree.

Her mom's and dad's pallid expressions kept flashing through her mind, and with each passing image came a fresh wave of irritation, hurt, and disappointment. They may not have found any evidence that directly linked the lab to the monster, but the connotation was there. And if the lab was really the source, then that meant that it was the source for Barbara's death, too. Which meant that her parents could very well be responsible — at least in part — for the

disappearance and murder of her best friend.

Son of a bitch, indeed.

"We gotta get back— to the car—" Hargrove breathed, pushing himself up.

"How?" she managed to squeak out.

A beam of light ran across the ground, inches away from their feet. They instinctively snapped their mouths shut and scooped further into the bush and each other, tucking their legs beneath them.

When the light continued on, Randy let out a shaky breath.

"We can't exactly go anywhere," she whispered, craned her neck to peer through the wiry branches before hissing, "Ugh — there's so many of them!"

"Yeah, well," he snapped, voice gravely, "it's not like we can just *sit* here."

Maybe not, but there was no way they could possibly outrun those guards. They were exhausted and outnumbered, and Randy was pretty sure her adrenaline had been depleted a *long* time ago. She felt like the living dead.

Reaching up to push her wild hair from her eyes, she paused when both her *and* Hargrove's hands popped up, tightly intertwined.

He, too, stared at their interlocked fingers, clearly as startled as her to realize that they were still holding hands... and obviously neither one of them horrified enough to notice.

Awkward gaze met awkward gaze, and they practically tore their hands from each other's.

There was a moment of unsteady silence, then,

"Let's just... not talk about that," he muttered, turning his face away.

If Randy didn't know any better, she'd say he was blushing. But that

was to say, she *did* know better, and that if anyone had a fiery face, it was her. Because as much as she wanted to deny it, his hand had felt the very opposite of bad pressed against hers.

She cleared her throat and scratched her cheek. "Agreed."

The search party was now making its way through the yard, around the building, and filtering into the dark hedgerow. It seemed that Hargrove's earlier judgment had been right: they were going to have to run. The longer they sat there, the more likely they were to be found. And she didn't exactly love the idea of prison, which was more than likely where they were going to end up if they got caught.

"We're going to have to make a break for it," he said.

Randy snapped her gaze to him.

"Wait, right *now*?" she asked, mortified.

"No. Sometime this year, maybe in May when the weather gets nice—*of course* right now, you idiot! We're just sitting ducks here — if we stay, they *will* find us!"

"Yeah, but if we run they'll see us! And the only way back to the car is through the woods, and that's where the—"

Something small and fuzzy squeezed in between them.

Randy squeaked in surprise and threw her hands up in the air, and Hargrove gave a muffled exclamation as he flung himself backwards.

"*HOLY F—*" He broke off, staring in mild horror — which quickly turned to rage — at the purring cat curling around his feet. "Are you *shitting* me right now?" he croaked.

The cat looked at him reproachfully from its perch against Randy's legs.

"Where the *hell* does this little shit keep coming from?" he yelled under his breath, tearing his glare from the yellow eyes and instead to Randy's equally as confused gaze. "Are you like some sort of crazy cat magnet? Stop it!"

"What? I *hate* cats! I'm not doing any—"

But the flashlight beam returned, and they were forced to throw themselves back into the safety of the bush. The cat used this opportunity to clamber into Hargrove's lap where it proceeded to brush its tails against his juttied chin.

"It's not my fault!" she continued in a rushed whisper. "Maybe he's following *you*?"

"Hell no," he snapped quietly, pushing the cat away from him. "It's not mine."

But the cat only seemed to take his attitude as a challenge, and leapt onto his shoulder to preen its fuzzy hindquarters against his very grouchy, and very exhausted, face.

He cursed, grappled at the cat, but the sound of crashing footsteps made them both freeze.

"Hey, I think I heard something—" a man called, and light cut through the foliage as he approached. "Came from over here."

Randy could see through the bush that one of the guards had wandered away from the others and was now far too close for comfort. He was diligently poking through every bush and tree, bending down to peer beneath logs. It was only a matter of seconds before they were discovered.

Randy began to panic, her heart thrumming hard in her ears.

"We need to leave — now," she urged, digging her fingers into Hargrove's arm. "Like, *now* now!"

He hissed in agitation as the cat shuffled from his shoulders to his head, but she didn't give him a moment to dislodge it from his hair.

"Go— NOW!" she exclaimed, and yanked Hargrove to his feet.

He stumbled, cursed, and the flashlight landed on them like a spotlight.

"FOUND THEM!" the guard bellowed.

But they didn't wait for the others to respond — they took off into the woods, shouts of "They're going this way! THEY'RE GOING THIS WAY!" ricocheting behind them like bullets.

—

Billy tried to pry the cat off his head, but it had sunk its claws deep into his hair when he'd stood to run. Now, trying to avoid a collision with a tree or a broken ankle from a root, there was no hope of disentangling it. If they somehow survived the night, he was going to make sure the damn thing ended up in *Cuba*.

"How close are they?" Peters asked over her shoulder, narrowly avoiding a pine tree.

Billy tried to turn his head, but all he got were nails digging into his skull.

He cursed, tried once more to rip the fleabag off of him, then snapped in squeaky aggravation, "I don't *know*! I can't see a *thing* thanks to this damn cat!"

"Just pull it off!" she yelled.

"I—" he yanked at it, earned a hiss and a snap of teeth— "CAN'T, DAMMIT!"

He looked around, still fighting with the fur-ball on his head. He was no sportsman, but he was beginning to think that they weren't going in the direction they had originally come from. And while that may have been a good way to avoid the creature, it certainly wasn't going to help them find his car — or the way out of the woods, for that matter.

After passing an unfamiliar and sorely aged POSTED sign tacked to a tree, he knew he was right.

They were going the wrong way.

"Where are we?" he puffed out.

"What do you mean?" Peters managed. "We're going back the way we came!"

But after a moment, she faltered.

"Oh no."

Billy didn't bother to reply to that — there seemed to be a lot of "oh no's" tonight, so why not one more?

The fence came into view, and Billy, with great, agitated force, managed to rip the cat off his head. Tucking it under his arm and promising himself he'd have it shipped as far away from Hawkins, Indiana as possible, he began to look for their haphazard opening, hoping against everything that they just managed to veer a few feet off their original course. But flashlight beams, yells, and no broken chain links confirmed his worst fear: they were far from where they were supposed to be, and now they needed to cut the fence open. Again.

"Ah *shit*!" he swore, threw the cat at Peters, and dug his Leatherman out of his pocket.

"Hurry, hurry!" she cried in hoarse exhaustion.

Sweat ran down his temples and his hands shook as *snip* by *snip* he broke small portions of the links. He could hear their pursuers getting closer, and Peters was now clinging to his coat with restless agitation.

"C'mon, Billy!"

"I'm fucking *trying*," he snapped, shaking a piece of wet hair out of his eyes.

It was *deja vu* — hadn't they gone through this exact same scenario earlier, only it was the creature waiting to pounce on them, not government workers?

"Dammit!" he hissed at his hands, which were tired and cold and refusing to cooperate.

It was slow work, but he eventually managed to cut enough to make

a hole just large enough for them to squeeze through. He kicked it at it until burst open, and Peters first tossed the cat through and then wriggled out herself.

She stuck her hand out for him to grab. "Let's go!"

He slapped his palm against hers and allowed her to help hoist him through the small space. Metal wires snagged his coat and scratched his cheek, and he had to twist himself to squeeze through the minuscule opening, but somehow, despite being twice Peters' size, he made it — and there was no way the lab workers were going to fit. Funny what desperation will make a person do.

They struggled to their feet and Peters scooped up the cat. Despite their burned out muscles and the ache of their lungs, they pushed themselves into a jog and away from the fence. Sporadic bursts of light and agitated voices pulsed around them, but if the feds weren't entirely blocked by the fence then it would at least buy him and Peters some time. Until then, they would have to try and find their way back to his Camaro without getting themselves more lost. Or worse—

Eaten.

Their labored breathing and the sound of night took over what had once been the shouts of the lab guards, and in all honesty, he had no idea which was worse: the woods or the feds. At least when they were being chased it had been by humans — now, in the open space of the woods with little more than a Leatherman and a cat, he knew they were entirely at the mercy of the four-legged demon beast.

A *click* came from beside him and a weak glow lit their feet up.

Without the humming spotlights that had kept the lab yard lit up like a football stadium, the woods were like roaming through pitch. He had no idea how Peters managed to keep a hold of the flashlight with all of the running they'd done, but with the way it was flickering he doubted it had enough life left in it to get them out of their predicament.

Digging into her pocket, she pulled out the crinkled and worn-out

looking map, and he watched as she tried to juggle the cat in her arms.

"How's that workin' for ya?" he asked satirically, too tired to feel amused but too annoyed with both her and the animal to offer a hand.

She huffed.

"It would work *fine* if you just helped—" She broke off to flip the map around. "Dang it."

He could tell by the way she was fumbling with it that she had no idea where they were. And even though he couldn't technically blame her for being lost, he was. And he was pissed.

The idea of being in danger, exhausted, *and* lost was aggravating to no possible end, especially because the whole night had been her own *genius* idea. Sure, he'd agreed to it. Sure, he hadn't argued about sneaking into the lab. But she *had* been the one to suggest hunting down the demon in the first place. If she had never said anything about it, he could have spent a glorious night asleep and far from the cold woods.

After watching her play with the map for a solid five minutes, he finally growled, "We're lost, dipshit. Just admit it."

She sighed, shoved the map back into her pocket, then rubbed her forehead vigorously. The situation was clear, and there was no point in her arguing about it.

They walked on in silence.

The flashlight went from flickering to sputtering out. Every so often, Peters would give it a hard tap and it would come, faintly, back to life, but the more often it happened, the weaker the light got. By the fifth tap, Billy could barely see their path. He almost told her to just shut the damn thing off — it wasn't doing them any good, anyway — but as if she could feel his aggravation, she killed it and stuffed it back into her coat pocket.

Now, it was silent *and* dark.

Billy didn't mind either of those things. In fact, he usually reveled in both. But it was the longest he had ever known Peters to go without speaking, and as much as he wanted to enjoy it, it was beginning to freak him out.

He peered sidelong at her.

He might be shit at reading people, but it was obvious that something was eating her. And two guesses as to what it could be. Her awkward greeting to her parents had surprised even him — he knew they worked (or practically lived) there, but it hadn't occurred to him that there was a possibility of actually *seeing* them. And by the way she was moping, he guessed she hadn't been expecting it, either.

Better yet, maybe she had been hoping they *wouldn't*.

A few more solid minutes of a silence and Billy finally broke.

"Alright, dipshit," he snapped, slicing through the nightly ambiance. "What's eating you?"

She shot him a confused look. "What?"

"Don't screw with me. You haven't said a word in twenty minutes. It's freaking me out."

She scowled.

"I'm sorry my silence is *disturbing* you." Though she sounded anything but apologetic. "I thought you'd enjoy it. You're always telling me to be quiet."

"Yeah, well—" He rubbed his forehead. "It's weird."

There was a pause, and Billy glowered at his feet. How was it that the only time he had actually attempted to care, he got snubbed for it?

"I saw my parents there," Peters finally blurted. She was staring straight ahead, the cat looking blasé under her arm. "It was kinda surreal. They were just... I don't know, normal? Like two people working in an office or something."

Yeah, working in a government lab that was cooking up man-eating monsters wasn't exactly normal.

"After finding out about Barb, I can't—" She broke off, ran a hand over her frizzy head. "I can't *look* at them. I mean, I don't even know if that's what happened to her, but just the *possibility* is... I don't know, it makes me sick. That they might have caused it, you know?"

Billy rubbed his ear, earring jangling against his nails, but said nothing. There really wasn't anything he *could* say. It wasn't like him and his old man had the best relationship. In fact, he *hated* his dad. His mom was gone and he'd spent his life feeling like a worthless piece of shit because of the cantankerous bastard. But at least the asshole was always openly an asshole. And at least he didn't help make a giant lizard that potentially ate his friend.

Geez, and he thought *his* life was fucked up. Peters had it rough.

She blew a raspberry, shifted the cat to her other arm. "I dunno. It sucks. But anyways, I'm gonna be grounded for *life* for what we did tonight."

But she was smiling like an idiot as she said it.

He snorted. "Usually that would make someone pissed."

"Yeah, but I've never been grounded," she pointed out. "And imagine: my first time in home-prison was because I broke into *federal property*." She sighed like she was dreaming up her prince in shining armor. "Who else can say that? Go big or go home, amiright?"

Whatever brooding cloud had just been hovering over her seemed to vanish. Which was relieving, because Billy wasn't about to go on some spiel on how to handle asshole parents or hug her or anything weird like that. He'd rather punch himself in the face.

Suddenly, Peters came to a halt.

"Oh my gosh," she whispered.

Billy followed her gaze.

The trees were thinning around them, but there, straight ahead, was a visible, definite end to the woods.

Civilization.

—

"Hell yes," Hargrove breathed, brushing past her at a jog. "Sweet, sweet humanity—"

Randy had managed to squelch her disturbance over her parents to save Hargrove the torment of listening to her lament about it, but that didn't mean it wasn't silently eating her alive. Still, the realization that they were finally making it out of the woods was almost enough to completely erase the persistent thoughts from her mind.

"Home, bed, warmth..." she chanted to herself, following after him like in a dream.

Sleep first, parents later.

Hargrove broke through the trees before she did, stumbled out into the open, threw his arms wide, and—

Froze.

"What. The. Hell."

Randy pushed her way past a stubborn thorn bush, taking care to shield the cat from harm, and came to a stop next to him.

"Oh," was all she could say.

And "oh" indeed. For there *was* an open space — finally — and at least *some* sign of human activity — but... it wasn't exactly a gas station. It wasn't even a house. Not even a *street*.

It was a pumpkin patch.

A very, very large pumpkin patch.

She exhaled and pressed the cat into her chest. As if sensing her distress, it began to wriggle around, digging its claws into her shoulder in an attempt to escape her hold. This time, she didn't fight it. It landed beside her feet on all fours and began to race off into the endless field.

"Well, this is just *dandy*," Hargrove snapped, his breathing billowing around him. "Just fucking *dandy*."

He kicked at a dead pumpkin, sent its innards splattering around them.

"Is there no end to this town's madness?" he snapped at her, threw his arms wide again to emphasize Hawkins. "I mean, seriously? *Seriously?*"

She didn't know what to tell him, because if she was being honest with herself, Hawkins *was* mad. Completely and utterly so. And for as long as she lived there, no — there was limit to it.

"I just—" He raked a shaky hand through his hair, earring glimmering silver as the moon peeked out from behind the clouds. "Holy shit, I just want to be *done* with this!"

Randy looked out over the patch, took in pumpkin after pumpkin. She'd be lying if she said she didn't feel the exact same.

"It's fine," she tried to reason with both herself and him. "It's fine. This is good — this is..." She paused, drew in a sharp breath as realization slammed into her like the ton of bricks. "My word, this is actually *good*."

She dug into her pocket, ripped the map out from it.

"Really?" Hargrove asked, venom lacing his words. "How many times are you going to look at that damn thing before you realize that we're *lost*? *LOST*?"

"But we're not!" She turned so the moon's wavering light could flood the map. "We were lost *before* because Hawkins Lab isn't on the map, but—" She shoved a finger into the paper, right on top of a square titled **Merrill Farm**. "But Merrill's pumpkin patch *is*."

He drew closer, peeked between her and the map. She was breathing heavily in excitement, knowing where they were and where they *should* be giving her hope that they could exit this living nightmare sooner rather than later. A little more walking, and they would back at the Camero and home free.

The fiery anger that had consumed him but ten seconds ago had now dissipated into a more stable ember glow, and he worked his jaw as he indicated to the forest.

"So it's back in."

It wasn't a question, so she didn't bother answering.

"I'll wager another thirty minute walk is ahead of us, maybe twenty-five if we push it." She shoved the map back into her pocket. "But we should reach the car if we head south."

"Right," he said, no gratitude or excitement. Just fact.

As he turned, he plowed his boot directly into a rotting pumpkin, spilling mold and seeds over his foot and releasing a horrible smell.

"Ugh," he hissed, shaking his boot off.

Randy covered her nose and back away, but she, too, landed in a rotting pumpkin.

"Wha—?" She broke off, took in the orange lumps surrounding them. That was when she realized, with a bit of alarm, that these were no *pumpkins* — they were just rotting corpses of what *should* have been pumpkins. And the more she stared in disgust and bewilderment, the more she saw, stretching endlessly before her. Just miles and miles of smelly, orange blobs. Not a single, plump, healthy one among them. "Hey, Hargrove?"

"What now?" he snapped, wiping the bottom of his boot across the ground.

"Do you see what I see?"

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. You think I'm blind? We're surrounded by

pumpkins—" He broke off, began muttering to himself about "that idiot".

"Yeah, but..." she trailed, grabbing hold of his coat and pointing, "they're all *dead*."

That final word seemed to catch his attention, and he turned his gaze from his boot to the rotting, fly-ridden and mold-struck pumpkin corpses surrounding them. If he was seeing what she was seeing, then he must have been feeling what she was feeling. Because one dead pumpkin? Fine. Five, maybe ten, in the patch? Normal. But the *whole field*? Just dead and rotting?

No. Not normal.

"Okay.... I might be from the city," he began, sounding suddenly very unsteady, "but even I know this isn't normal."

"It's not," she confirmed.

"Right. We need to leave."

She didn't argue.

As they pushed their way back to the trees, Randy cast one last look at the field of death behind her, wondering, somewhat nauseously, if the phenomena had something to do with her parents, too.

20. It's the Pine Sol

The drive back home was long and quiet, much longer than Billy remembered it being. Which seemed pretty damn petty of him. Given that they had just wandered in the woods for half the night, and the drive home — which was only about ten minutes — was the final, and shortest, stretch of the nightmare they had somehow managed to survive, he didn't think that he had much reason to complain. After outrunning a monster and barely escaping government workers, sitting in the safety and warmth of his Camero was the easiest thing he had done all night. Still, what should have felt like an easy ten minutes felt instead like an eternity.

Now that he thought about it, though, that was how the drive from California had been. The last twenty minutes to Hawkins had seemed like the longest part of the drive — just endless trees and fields, the horrible smell of cow shit, and the gnawing sensation that the next two years of his life were going to be the worst he had ever lived (and that was saying something). And hey, he hadn't been wrong. But at least back then he hadn't been looking forward to arriving. Now, tired, cold, and honestly quite unnerved, he couldn't wait to be home and in bed. The thought of his old man set ice in his stomach, sure, but even that wasn't enough to make him want to be back in the woods.

Billy shifted in his seat, resting his left elbow on the window and leaning his head against his hand as he watched the glowing yellow lines pass by one by one. Peters was eerily silent in her seat. He had half expected her to blabber on and on about the pumpkins and the lab and the monster, but he guessed she must have felt as exhausted as he did, because the moment she sat in the car she had slumped right down in her seat, cried "Finally!", and hadn't said a word since.

Which he was thankful for. He was just too damn tired to talk — or listen, for that matter. He *really* didn't want to hear another a word about anything that had happened. In fact, if he could forget the hellish nightmare entirely, it'd be great. A faceless monster *and* a corrupt government lab *and* a whole field of dead pumpkins? His Batshit Crazy scale had just reached its limit.

Peters definitely hadn't been wrong: Hawkins was a madhouse.

Glancing at her, he wondered if she had fallen asleep. She certainly hadn't moved, anyway, all huddled in her seat like she was worried something might grab her legs from underneath her chair. He had the heat blasted and Def Leppard's Too Late for Love drifted quietly over the radio, and every so often a streetlight would light up the car before they were bathed in darkness again. It was a perfect recipe for sleep.

Even beneath the tangled, frizzy mess that was her hair Billy could make out the edge of her jawline. Staring at it, he had the very sudden — and every intense — urge to reach over and touch her. It was unexpected, completely caught him off guard, and he found himself lifting his hand, reaching forward, and—

HOLY FUCK. NO.

He slammed both hands down onto the wheel and locked his fingers tight in panic. That was when he noticed he was veering off the road, and gave the car a jerk to bring it back into his lane with enough force to rock Peters in his seat.

She stirred, lifted her head from the window in alarm and looked around them as if expecting to see something chasing them.

"What was that?" she asked, voice hoarse from fatigue.

It took Billy a second to get a hold of himself. His hands were beginning to sweat and his heart was pounding again, just like when they had been stuck in the closet.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Nothing. Must've... dozed off."

She continued to stare around them for only a second longer, and then her head was back on the window. She was dead to the world once more.

What the hell? He screamed at himself, horrified. *What. The. Hell?*

Seriously, what had *that* been about? Wanting to touch Peters' jaw? And feeling attracted to her in the closet back at the lab?

What, in the everlasting fuck, was going on?

It was the Pine Sol, he reasoned. *And exhaustion.*

It had been a long night, and sniffing chemicals muddles everyone's brains, right? He just needed sleep — *lots* of sleep — and everything would be back in order. That was all.

He peeked at her again, but this time her hair covered her face. He nearly groaned. It all probably had to do with her. He wouldn't be surprised if her insanity had finally gotten to him, if he was finally beginning to break. Maybe their hellish night had been the final straw, and his brain was short-circuiting, imagining horrible and disgusting things in a sad attempt at coping.

Whether it was sleep deprivation and chemicals or the true beginnings of insanity, Billy didn't have time to dwell, because after what felt like an eternity their street finally came into view. He let out a long, relieved breath and turned sharply down it, happier than ever to kick Peters out and take a well-deserved break from her madness.

When he passed her house and started to turn into his driveway, he noticed a car parked in front of her sidewalk. He'd never seen it there before: a maroon BMW, sleek and shiny new, that looked like it belonged on a street like the Wheeler's, not theirs. It was out of place surrounded by the rusted beaters of their neighbors, nearly as out of place as his own. He was beginning to wonder if it belonged to Peters' parents when she suddenly shot forward in her seat with a horrified gasp.

"Oh no!" she squeaked. "What time is it?"

Billy glanced at the clock as she pressed her face against the window and said, "10:54. Why?"

She groaned a long, miserable groan and sunk low into her seat, covering her face with her hands.

"He's gonna kill me," she whispered.

"Who?" he asked.

There was a beat of silence, then,

"Steve," she muttered without removing her hands.

Billy's stomach twinged, then. It was a horrible twinge, one he had only ever felt when he thought about his mom living her happy, perfect life with her new husband and her new kids. He didn't know why he felt it. It was just Peters and Harrington, why'd it matter to him what the hell they did together?

"Well," he began, suddenly peevish as he shut the car off, "Guess you better go appease your boyfriend."

He earned a scowl at this.

"How many times do I have to tell you? He's *not* my boyfriend!"

Billy just shrugged and opened his door.

"Whatever you say," he muttered, stepping out into the cold night air.

On a normal day, she may have exploded. And on a normal day, he may have kept needling her. But considering they had just ran around the woods for over five hours, neither one of them had much fight left in them.

She climbed out of the car, too, slammed the door closed with maybe a little more force than he would have appreciated. He didn't say anything, though, just watched her tuck her hands into her pockets and stare at her house like she was gearing up to face another monster. And maybe she was. Because whether or not her and Harrington were dating, he had still seen her climb out of the Camero at almost eleven o'clock at night. Her and Billy weren't supposed to be seen together — period. And after Tommy's rumors, Billy was certain that Harrington's story was going to really add fuel to the fire, and it wasn't going to be pretty.

"Good luck," he said without meaning it, and turned to walk to his front door.

"Hey—" she called softly. He paused, glanced at her. "Um... about tonight..."

"Let's just not tell anyone about this, okay?" he cut her off.

For a second, hurt flashed across her face. Then, as quick as it had come, it vanished.

"Yeah." She nodded. "Right. Probably not a good idea."

"No," he agreed.

Silence.

He shifted, not used to feeling awkward around her, and then began to make his way up the porch steps. But again, she called out to him, and again, he couldn't stop himself from obeying.

It was irritating how delicate she looked in the faint glow of his porch light. He wasn't used to thinking nice things about girls other than what he wanted to do to them under the sheets, and he *especially* wasn't used to thinking nice things about Peters, but with her standing there, looking almost desperately up at him, he couldn't help it. She just looked... attractive. For once. And it was horrible.

"I um... I just wanted to say 'thanks'." She shrugged her shoulders uncomfortably, dragged her eyes away from his. "If you hadn't been there tonight, I would be dead. Or in prison. Maybe both."

The last part was a joke but he could tell she didn't really find it funny, and oddly enough, neither did he. But maybe he was just feeling sentimental because that damn Pine Sol was still screwing with his head.

"Yeah," he responded after a minute, curt and emotionless. "No problem."

More silence.

"Guess I better defuse the bomb," she teased, motioning to her house.

Another twinge.

"Right," he muttered.

Then they parted ways. With the door half open and his foot stuck over the threshold, he fought the urge to look back at her, telling himself a good night of sleep would cure his increasingly nauseating thoughts.

Randy didn't know why, but watching him leave made her feel scared. After what they had just experienced, she supposed it was only natural that being left alone would freak her out, but still, clinging to him? He saved her life, sure, but they hated each other. Or , at least, *he* hated her.

To be honest, she wasn't sure what she felt for him anymore. It was like he was two different people sometimes, one that made her want to be around him more, the other making her want to push him off a sixty-foot bridge. It was irritating how much he messed with her head without even trying. Like tonight, he just seemed... different. Not in a bad way, but it was still weird. Or maybe it was because *she* felt weird about it. She wasn't used to him being so pleasant, or helpful, or whatever it was that made him okay — she had no idea how to handle it.

The sound of her footsteps seemed to carry across the neighborhood as she made her way to her house. She wished she hadn't forgotten to leave the front light on. The porch and sidewalk were dark, and without Hargrove with her she felt like something might pounce out at her at any moment.

Like Steve.

She glanced at his car, half-expecting him to jump out of the window and tackle her. She couldn't see anything inside, but it was really too dark to tell. It felt like someone was watching her, so she knew he was in there, staring.

Ugh, she thought, shivering. *This is gonna suck.*

Steeling herself for the verbal attack that was certainly going to come, she went to step onto the porch and—

"You're late."

She tried to muffle her scream, but it was still loud enough to make the neighbor's dog bark across the street. With her hands clamped over her mouth and her heart trying to jump out of her throat, she stared at the shadow by her feet, startled to see a lumpy figure sitting on the steps.

"S-Steve?!" she squeaked.

"What, are you blind?" he snapped, and stood so that she could just make out his face underneath his gravity-defying hair. "I've been sitting here for like three hours."

Lowering her shaky hands, she swallowed.

"Yeah, but you're sitting in the *dark*, I couldn't see you! And it's freezing out here — are you nuts?"

"I should be asking you the same thing," he said accusingly, and she knew she was in big trouble. "Getting out of Billy Hargrove's car at eleven at night? What the hell has gotten into you?"

"It was— it was actually 10:54," she reasoned like a kid about to be spanked.

"Oh? *Oh?*" And he smiled, and Randy knew he was finally cracking. "I'm sorry: 10:54. Because that makes *everything* better, doesn't it? You're right — I'm sorry for being upset. I guess because it wasn't *actually* eleven it doesn't matter, right? I mean, you were only just off doing God-knows-what in his car, right? No big deal."

He snorted and pushed past her, began to walk back to his car.

"Steve!" she called, bracing herself on the porch railing, too tired to chase him and *not* wanting to deal with his crap after running for almost five hours straight. "Can we just talk about this like to stable adults, please? Just skip over the whole high-school-teenage-drama twaddle?"

"And say what? Huh?" he retorted, spinning around so he was walking backwards. "That you guys are like mysteriously dating now, or some bullshit? I mean, c'mon Andy. Really?"

"No, because that's *not* what's going on."

"Oh yeah? Then why don't you tell me what's going on? Cause it looks pretty damn obvious to me."

"Just—" she broke off, huffed, then laid her head on top of her arms. She was *way* too tired for this. She lifted it again, scratched her forehead. "Okay, just come inside so I can explain, alright? I've spent five hours running around the freezing cold woods hunting a monster, and I would just *really* love to sit on the couch."

Oh no.

The words had just slipped out. She really didn't have any intention on telling him about what they were *really* doing (she was just going to BS her way through Steve's angry-dad routine), but deep exhaustion had resulted in no filter, and Steve was now staring at her with his mouth dropping open.

I've done a bad thing now...

Steve paced back and forth across Randy's living room, hands on his hips and hair flopping with every step. It was what she liked to call The Dad Pace™, and she knew she had a semi-truck of a lecture coming her way.

Telling him that her and Hargove had been out hunting for a monster probably wasn't the *smartest* thing she could have said. Actually, it was probably the dumbest. Considering he already thought she was nuts for taking a joy ride with Hargove, he was probably trying to figure out how to get her checked into a mental institution for talking about monsters. Or maybe he thought she was lying, and he was going to chew her out for making up stories like a desperate toddler. Either way, she really hated how that little receptor between her head and her mouth always seemed to malfunction when she needed it to work the most.

"Okay," he said at last, coming to a stop and holding his hands out as if he were trying to convince himself that everything was, indeed, okay. "Let's try this one more time."

"Are you going to flip out again?"

He made a *bzzzt* noise, cutting her quiet, and she stared at him.

"I'm the one interrogating here!" And he pointed a finger at her, which pretty much answered her question. "Now, I'm going to ask you one more time: What were you doing with Billy Hargrove?"

Good question.

She would really like to know the answer to that herself.

"It's a long story," she answered simply.

So Steve dropped onto the couch with enough force to rattle her. He lifted his hands as if to say, "oh well", then reclined back.

"I've got all night," he said.

She sighed. There was no getting of this, was there?

Beating around the bush wasn't going to do her any good at this point, not with The Dad Face™ he was sporting. And anyway, there really wasn't any point in hiding it, was there? A monster was roaming around Hawkins — he was going to find out about it sooner or later. Besides, he knew something about Barb's disappearance. There were too many silent "oopsies" when they talked about her. Every time he was supposed to say "disappeared" it would sound like he was going to say "dead", and that was just really darn suspicious. She'd always thought so, but the only answer she ever had for it was that he might have had a hand in it. Murder, maybe, or something sketchy like that, even though she knew he didn't have it in him to murder or kidnap anyone. (Not mention he couldn't win a fight to save his life — Barb could have easily kicked the hoohaa out of him if it came down to it, no questions asked.)

No, Steve definitely knew something, and if Barb was really killed by the monster, then that meant he knew something about it, and possibly about the lab, too. And she was going to needle it out of him.

"Fine," she relented, sinking deeply into the couch but keeping eye

contact, feeling more like the interrogator than him. "Fabio and I were out hunting a monster."

"Right, and I eat kittens for breakfast."

"Is that the secret to your hair?"

He ignored her.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

The question was so blindsiding and horrifying that she all but bellowed, "*Gross, no!*"

He seemed satisfied.

"So is he threatening you? Forcing you to do his homework for him?" he pressed. "Getting you into drugs? Or what?"

"No, no, and *no*."

"So you expect me to seriously believe you were 'monster hunting' with him?"

"Yes."

Steve was not particularly good at hiding his feelings, and the way his countenance was flickering told her that he was feeling distinctly uncomfortable with her answer. And not in a "you're a freak" sort of way, but more in a "how do you know about that" type of reaction.

He inhaled, paused, then released the breath loudly. Raking a hand through his gravity-defying hair, he rose from the couch and began to pace again.

"Okay," he began rather shakily, "Let's say that, hypothetically speaking, I believe you guys were actually out hunting a monster." A pause. He turned to look at her. "What kind of monster are we talkin' about?"

Now they were cooking with oil.

"Four legs, kinda leathery looking, and faceless. No, wait—" She grappled for an explanation. "Well, it's mouth *is* its face. When it opens its mouth, its whole head just..." She demonstrated a popping open motion, wiggling her hands.

Steve swallowed and his face turned a few shades paler.

"Right," he croaked.

A moment of silence.

"Right," he said again.

Then he grabbed the lamp on the side-table and began to fiddle with the top. She watched him throw the shade off, pop the bulb out, and mess around with it some more before letting out an aggravated noise and reaching down and unplugging it entirely. Then he unplugged the phone. Then the TV. Then the radio. Then the other two lamps. He shut off the ceiling light, closed the door to the kitchen, and only stopped when every cord around him had been ripped out from the wall and they were bathed in complete darkness.

"Okay, you're kinda freaking me out..." she muttered, suddenly beginning to panic. What if he really *had* murdered Barbra?

...And she was next?

But Steve just said with some paranoia, "Bugs — those dicks listen to everything we say if we're not careful."

"Okay, first of all, my house is *not* bugged." She pointed at him, feeling distinctly uncomfortable with the thought. "And second, *who* is listening in?"

"Um, hello? You're parents' work? The lab, idiot. And of course you're bugged — this whole town is under surveillance. Why do you think things got brushed under the rug last year? They control what goes on in Hawkins."

Now she was standing.

"You know about the lab? And last year— holy bananas, are you

talking about Barb?"

Even in the dark she could see that he was staring.

"You know about that?" he asked, sounding incredulous. "What else do you know?"

"I know that the lab cooked up that monster. I know this isn't its first escape. I know Barb was taken by it. I know they're testing something right now, and I know that *thing* can't be killed."

"Well shit." It wasn't a reassuring reply. "You're in serious danger, you know that?"

"This whole *town* is in danger!" she hissed, gesturing to the front door. "There's a *monster* loose and—"

"Alright, alright," he waved his hands as if batting away a cloud of bugs. "Let's just... Just start from the beginning, okay? Tell me how you learned about this."

So Randy took a deep breath and launched into her story. She started with the night she first saw the monster, how Hargrove had hit it with his car and inadvertently saved her life. She told him about the rides to and from school, the night of the Halloween party, her discovery at the library, and her dad's strange call. Then she told him about their hunt, how they'd stocked up on weapons and then pelted the beast with bullets and bats; how they'd stumbled across the lab and managed to get inside; how they'd found her parents, had to outrun the workers, and then managed to get lost in the woods. She even told him about the pumpkin field, not really knowing how it was related to everything, but just feeling a thousand times lighter now that she finally had someone to confide everything in, someone who actually understood.

By the time she'd finished, the clock read 1:05 and her eyes were feeling exceedingly heavy. Steve, however, looked more awake than ever as he stared at the dead TV with his fingers drumming against his leg.

"Wow," was all he said.

It summarized it pretty well, in her opinion.

"So how did you find out about all of this?" she asked. "What happened last year?"

Now it was his turn to look exhausted. He threw himself into the couch and rubbed his forehead.

"What *didn't* happen last year?" He snorted. "Well, I guess you can say I got into things pretty late. As usual, Jonathan and Nancy were in on it long before I knew anything." This earned a moment of bitter silence. Then, "Well, Nancy and I had broken up, and I found out she was at his house one night. I was trying to win her back, so I showed up to talk to her — try and explain and all that shit — but instead I walked into some seriously weird shit. I mean, Christmas lights *all over* the inside of his house, furniture turned over, things broken, a huge hole in the wall— and there were freaking *bear traps* on the floor, and Nancy had a gun and Jonathan had a bat with nails. So *of course* I flipped a lid, tried to figure out what the hell was going on, when suddenly that *thing* showed up. The lights started going nuts—"

"The street lamps did that!"

"—and Nancy and Jonathan were suddenly pulling me away from it and into a room, and I can't really remember it all because it was *insane*, but we beat it up, I hit it with a bat, and then we got it to walk into the trap and Jonathan set it on fire—"

He broke off, gesturing madly.

"I mean, it was crazy!"

"Yeah," Randy said, "I know the feeling."

"Anyway, somehow the lab had managed to open up a portal to some alternate dimension or some crazy shit, that's where the monster came from." He glanced at her. "And that's where Will Byers went. He was stuck in there with that thing."

"So that's what Nancy was doing... " Randy murmured. She felt guilty for being so mad at her. "And what about Barb?"

"Well..." Steve nodded his head from side to side. "You guessed it. The thing took her. But... unlike Will, she never made it back."

A terrible hollowness overtook her stomach.

"Poor Nancy," Randy whispered. "She knew about this the whole time, but couldn't say anything..."

"She's been falling apart over it. Every time we met with Barbara's parents, she about lost it."

"I can imagine why... I felt like *I* was going nuts just *thinking* that's what happened to her. But actually knowing?" She cringed, looked down at her hands. "I feel like the worst friend."

"It's not like you knew," he consoled awkwardly. "I mean, *before*, anyway."

"But the lab... I mean, they *did* create the monster, right?"

"If you mean 'did they tear a hole through fucking time and space and release a monster on Hawkins'? Yes, yes they did."

Randy rubbed her face, feeling way more tired than she had before.

"Great. So mommy and daddy are killers," she whispered into her hands.

She had guessed it. And after what her and Hargrove went through, she knew it. But having cold confirmation of it was something else entirely — it was more than just a bitter daughter expecting the worst of her workaholic parents, it was the plain and simple truth.

"Sorry, Andy," Steve murmured, giving her a stiff pat on the shoulder. "I don't think your parents meant it, if that's any consolation."

She smiled wanly. It wasn't, but she was thankful that he cared enough to try.

He got up from the couch and plugged the lamp back in beside her. He kicked it on, and the dark living room burst with light. Whether unplugging it had solved their problem or not, she didn't know, but

at least he seemed satisfied.

He lifted his watch and gave a quiet curse. From the clock hanging over the mantel, Randy could see that it was already well past one, and they hadn't accomplished any of what they had originally planned to do. She felt very guilty about that. She *had* promised to help him get Nancy back, and all she did was make him sit on her freezing porch for hours waiting for her, then make him listen to her nusto spiel about monsters and corrupt government labs.

Given everything that was going on, ex-girlfriend problems seemed like preschool drama. But Steve was her friend — a *good* friend — and at this point, basically her only. Getting Nancy back may be stupid in the face of an endangered Hawkins, but after everything he had done for her, she felt like she owed him to try.

"Listen," she began uncertainly, clearing her throat, "I know we were supposed to talk Nancy tonight, and I kinda—"

"Nah, don't worry about it," he interrupted, giving a halfhearted smile. "I mean, we've got bigger things on our plate, right?"

"No," she said flatly. "You love Nancy, that's a big deal. I promised I'd help you get her back, and that's what I'm going to do."

"Andy, we have a *monster*—"

"Which means it would be *that* much more tragic if you got eaten. You can't die an old spinster, Steve. That's sad. Really sad."

"Wow." He squinted at her. "Kinda rich coming from you, but okay."

She shrugged. "I've accepted it. But you have prospects, and tomorrow, we're going to go full Shakespeare on her. Flowers, apologies — the whole shabang."

"Are you suggesting that I go to her *house* and talk to her?"

"I'll be with you, of course," she promised.

"Uh, how about no? What would I even say to her? And in front of her family? I mean, c'mon. That's just batshit. She'll probably tell me

to take a hike or something..."

But she could see the twinkle in his eye.

"It'll be fine. We'll go over a game plan tomorrow as we're driving there, we'll stop and get her some nice flowers, and then I'll stay in the car and let you do your thing, maybe let you two make out for a few minutes, and then viola. Full-proof."

That was a bit of an exaggeration. It wasn't full-proof... at all. In fact, if she was being honest with herself, she *really* didn't think that Nancy was interested in taking Steve back. Now or ever. It was obvious that something was going on between her and Jonathan, Randy had sensed it since last year, and it wasn't just monster hunting or searching for Will and Barbara together.

Either way, Steve seemed confident even though he kept telling her it wouldn't work. It was like he was trying not to smile, his chin was held up and he had that cocky swagger going as he made his way to her front door, all the while muttering, "it's a bad idea" and "she doesn't love me". But Randy just kept telling him to pick her up at eleven, not to be late, and that everything would be fine. Despite his disagreements, she could tell he believed it.

As soon as he was out the door, still muttering about how the plan was never going to work, Randy double locked it, tore off her jacket and her sopping shoes and socks, and headed straight for the shower with legs like jelly.

Billy stared up at his ceiling, exhausted yet wide awake. His whole body was screaming in agony — his knees ached, his feet throbbed, his lungs felt like deflated balloons, and his legs were more useless than rubber. No matter how he tried to lay, every position seemed to be more painful than the last. And just when he would finally get comfortable, just when his eyes would grow heavy and his mind quiet, he would see it — that *thing* — and his body would give a horrible jolt, his eyes would fly open, and he would find himself covered in sweat as he stared at the darkness of his room, chest heaving, wide awake once more.

About the fifth time it happened, he finally gave up. No matter how tired he was, sleep wasn't going to come. There was too much pain in his limbs and his mind was too plagued by a four-legged, faceless creature to let him get the reprieve that he needed. Which really sucked, because being awake gave him all the time in the world to think about the light that was pouring through his window from Peters' bedroom, the very last thing he wanted on his mind. Ever.

He kept telling his brain to *let it go, damn it*, but no matter how many times he screamed at himself, his eyes kept drifting to her curtains, visible through his window, and his mind kept wandering to the possible things occurring behind them. Whatever her and Harrington were doing, it must have been *really* interesting, because she was the kind of weirdo who was lights-out by nine and awake at the butt crack of dawn. Late nights with boys was far from her style. So really, *what* was Harrington doing with her that could persuade her to skip her goody-two-shoes bedtime?

Billy groaned and covered his face with his hands.

The question was rhetorical, of course. And stupid. He knew better than anyone what they were up to. He'd done it himself with dozens of girls. But the idea of Harrington and Peters together was nauseating on a thousand different levels, a few of which brought that awful twinge back every now and again.

From behind his hands he heard a car door slam, the rev of an engine, and the sound of tires crackling against pavement as a car pulled away. He sat up and peered out his window, straining his eyes to see if Harrington had finally left.

No maroon BMW.

Billy threw himself back down onto his bed, feeling a small weight lift from his gut. But he knew he still wouldn't be able to sleep. That stupid creature kept floating behind his eyelids, haunting his almost-asleep dreams. It made him feel like a kid again, being too scared to even close his eyes. The only thing that had ever gotten him this twisted up was his old man, and his reality was so much worse than his nightmares, dreaming about it had stopped bothering him a long time ago.

Ten minutes after the car pulled away, a shadow passed across the light coming through his window and he glanced up. After a second, the bedroom light shut off and the glow vanished. Peters was finally going to bed.

Billy laid there in silence, jaw working, hands fisted on his chest as he tried to force himself to relax. But after a second, the bedroom light kicked back on, and he glanced at his window again. There was no moon outside, it was far too cloudy now, but he could see the side of her house from the pale glow of her window, and her shadow flickered across the light.

Was she as restless as he was?

Couldn't she sleep?

Or was she too scared?

That's what Harrington is for, dumbass, his mind grumbled. *She'll call him to come hold her or some shit.*

But after a half hour of staring at the side of her house, no Harrington showed.

Billy sat up and peered out the window, taking in the white curtains across the lawn. A part of his brain kept screaming, *It's just Peters, let her suffer! It's her own damn fault this all happened!* and, *Who cares if she's upset? It's not your job to worry about the dipshit.* While another part kept arguing that after what they had been through, it was only natural that he would want to make sure she was alright. Not because he cared, of course, because he definitely didn't. But just because he was human, and he supposed being human meant, naturally, having some anxiety for other humans. Or some bullshit like that.

Fidgeting, irritated with himself, he finally slid out of bed. He pulled on a pair of jeans, shrugged on his leather jacket, slipped his feet into his boots, and then pushed his window open.

As he stared down at the shadowed grass between their houses, he shook his head.

"I can't believe I'm gonna do this," he muttered.

Then he heaved himself through.

Randy held her blanket tightly to her chest as she stared at her bedroom door. She had tried to turn off the light and sleep like a normal person, but like some ridiculous little kid, she just couldn't.

Before going to bed, she'd checked her closet, looked under her bed, and locked her room door. She'd double-checked her window and made sure the curtains were tightly drawn before crawling under her blankets. Then she'd sat there a moment, taking in the room around her, before finally reaching over and flicking off her light. Within seconds, she regretted doing it. In the new darkness she felt like there was something lurking in every corner: she stared at the crack under her door, expecting to hear something shuffling on the other side; she glanced at the hulking shadows of her desk and her dresser, at the small fish tank bubbling merrily away, which all suddenly looked like the creature; she waited for her closet to creak open, for something to growl inside it, to lunge out and grab her like the monster had done in the woods. The longer she laid there and imagined, the worse it got. When she couldn't take it anymore she kicked the light back on, blinked in the dazzling glow, and saw that everything was just as it always had been: no monster in sight.

The whole thing had lasted maybe five minutes, but it felt like she'd endured the darkness for hours. She hated that she was so scared. But given everything she'd been through, could she really blame herself? It wasn't like she was wigged out over Dracula or some made-up nonsense — she'd really seen the monster, had felt its leathery body and its claws against her. She'd see its face split open like some alien plant, had smelled its rotting breath. Was it really so stupid that she was afraid of the dark?

Curling her legs up, she couldn't help wishing that her parents were home. Or wishing that maybe she'd asked Steve to stay, made him up a bed on the couch or something. Being alone was the last thing she wanted.

A sudden tapping on her window made her yelp and fly out of her bed. She stumbled away until her back hit the closet door, staring at the curtains which had a shadow flickering behind them.

More tapping, this time more incessant.

She inhaled shakily, wondering if she should barricade herself in the bathroom, when a muffled voice made her shoulders droop.

Hargrove, she thought with a flood of relief.

She threw back her curtains and saw his tired but annoyingly handsome face on the other side, looking impatient as he motioned for her to open the window. Giving him a "what the heck?" look, she unlocked the pane and lifted it up.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at him, even though she was entirely alone.

"Freezing my ass off," he snapped. "Would you move and let me in before I turn into a popsicle?"

"What? No! You can't just—"

But he was already lifting himself up and wriggling through the window.

"Hey, don't—"

He pushed her aside and she watched in irritation as he very ungracefully fell head-first onto her floor, boots following in a wide arc that nearly took out her fish tank.

"Smooth," she deadpanned.

"Yeah, well," he grunted, lifting himself up and fixing his hair, "I'm not used to having to sneak through windows. I'm usually *invited* through the front door. You know, like a decent person."

"You *could* have just knocked. It's not like I have parents here," she pointed out.

"Wasn't sure if your boyfriend was still here. Thought I'd make a talented entrance and start a fight."

"And do you include waking up the whole neighborhood a part of

this 'talented entrance'?"

For indeed, his sneaky fall had shook the whole house, making her thankful that her parents weren't home. If they'd caught a boy slipping through her window, what would they do?

Probably laugh in disbelief.

She watched the foreign specimen look around her room as he smoothed his leather jacket and shook out his legs to straighten his rumpled jeans. She'd never had a guy in her room before — ever. Not even Steve. He'd sat in her living room, feet away from her on the couch, sure, but even *that* had made her feel uncomfortable. Having one in her room was like inviting an alien in for a cup of tea — it simply didn't happen. Or it *shouldn't*, anyway. Aliens, that is. She'd never met one, but she supposed they wouldn't make great guests.

Which, in her sleep-hazed mind, made her wonder: *Could* aliens drink tea? Or would caffeine, a natural poison, slowly kill them? And if they could manage it, what kind would they prefer? Earl Grey? Jasmine? Macha? Or perhaps they were a decaf sort of species, and preferred chamomile, peppermint, or—

"I see you're falling asleep standing up."

The observation made her blink and realize she'd been sharing at him. There was something warm and wet dribbling down her chin, and she wiped at it.

Drool.

Smooth.

"I'm tired," she said simply. "And couldn't help wondering what kind of tea aliens would drink if they could."

"Please go to bed." It wasn't a suggestion, it wasn't a command. it was a genuine statement of concern.

"I was *trying*, but then you so rudely pushed your way through my window." She watched as he took off his leather jacket and threw it onto her desk chair. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

He shrugged, dropped lazily onto her bed and propped his arms behind his head. "Gettin' comfy."

She made a noise of disgust and attempted to prod him off her bed.

"You can do that in your own room. Ugh. You're making my pillows smell like your awful cologne — did you even take a shower?"

"Nope."

"Eew!" Now she really tried to push him off, nose wrinkled. "Go back to your own bed!"

But he batted her away, looking unimpressed by her feeble manpower.

"Your light was on. You weren't going to sleep, dipshit." He was obviously groggy, but his voice still had its bite. "Just admit you were scared and that you want the company. Now go the hell to sleep."

Randy stared at him, barely daring to breathe.

She couldn't believe it.

Was Hargrove... *concerned* for her?

His eyes were closed and he was kicking off his boots, showing a pair of socks that peeked over the edge of her small, full-sized mattress. There was no hint in his posture that he was planning on moving — in fact, he looked very much like he planned on staying there the whole night.

It would be a lie if she said she wasn't lonely. That she wasn't scared. That she didn't want him around. Because she *was* lonely and scared, and she did, oddly enough, want him there. His presence was strangely comforting, like the warm glow of a flashlight in a pitch black room. Kicking him out now would only make that horrible feeling of vulnerability even worse, and probably completely destroy her already slim chances of catching an hour or two of sleep. Was it worth the pride? Or should she let the night of abnormalities continue?

Chewing on her nail, she finally decided to let it be. The bed was big enough for the both of them so long as hands (cough, *Hargrove*, cough) didn't travel places they shouldn't, and legs were kept to themselves. Besides, she had a feeling he wasn't entirely opposed to the company, either.

"Alright," she relented. "But you stay over *there*. And don't try anything."

"In your dreams," he snorted tiredly. "I wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole."

Rude, but reassuring.

Closing and locking her window, she pulled the curtains tightly shut once more and crawled under her blankets. She made sure to keep her back to the extra weight beside her, then reached over and tentatively clicked off the light.

Once again, they were bathed in darkness. But this time, the shadows were just her dresser, desk, and fish tank. This time, she wasn't waiting to hear something underneath her door. This time, her closet was still empty and under the bed was still packed with boxes of pictures, old school papers, and dusty socks.

This time, she felt safe.

And not for the first time that night, she was very thankful that Billy had stumbled into her life.